Chrome Shelled Regios Volume6

source : http://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Chrome_Shelled_Regios:Volume6

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鋼殻のレギオスVI
レッド・ノクターン
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レッド・ノクターン 鋼殻のレギオスVI 雨木シュウスケ 富士見ファンタジア文庫

鋼殻のレギオスVI
レッド・ノクターン

嫌な予感がした。

「隊長は、どうしました？」

いずれわかることだし、誰かが聞かなければならなかった。

「ニーナは現在、行方不明だ」

冷たく、つらい現実を、銀髪の生徒会長が告げる。その瞬間、レイフォンは心の中でコトリ……となにかの音がしたのを感じた。

その間にも、夥しい数の汚染獣がツェルニに向かって、愚直なまでの一直線で向かってくる。

一方、グレンダンを発ったリーリンは途中で立ち寄った学園都市・マイアスで奇妙な事件に巻き込まれる。

そこで彼女が出会ったのは――。

超快進撃シリーズ、大転回の第六弾！

9784829119266

ISBN978-4-8291-1926-6
C0193 ¥580E

定価：本体580円（税別）

1920193005806

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鋼殻のレギオス VI
レッド・ノクターン

「……僕がこんなところでじっとしているなんて、
許されないんです」

「誰が許さないのかね？
少なくとも私ではないと思うが？」

「人はかつて、我をクラウドセル・分離マザーⅣ・ハルペーと呼んだ」

Prologue

It was an extremely random meeting.

To Synola or Alsheyra Almonise, sleeping wasn't an equivalent of being defenseless. Although her senses were clumsier than usual, even a Heaven's Blade successor would find it difficult to attack her in her sleep. Synola could prove it with Kanaris. She could tell Kanaris was within 100 steps of where she was even while she was using Kei to mask her presence. This wasn't a matter of confidence, but reality.

On that day, Synola spent the entire night in the lab. She had had a meeting till dawn with the other researchers, and had staggered drunkenly onto the lawn outside and slept there. The air smelled fresh and crisp in the morning. An entrance ceremony was currently in progress in the senior school next door. The researchers over on this side had gone over to help, so there weren't that many people in the lab now. Synola's strange behavior was well known among her fellow researchers. Sleeping outside on the lawn was nothing to them. Since she thought no one would bother her since they were all busy, she had laid down on the lawn and slept with ease. Even if the stubborn professor found her, it would be interesting to make him mad about it. Synola's personality was created to fulfill the desires of Alsheyra Almonise. Making a professor mad was something Alsheyra would do without ever getting tired of it.

Synola wanted to get up, but she had no motivation to do so. She knew she'd quickly tire of her life as Synola if she kept living in this identity. Life couldn't be always full of joy. There always

were boredom and arguments. She took on the identity of Synola because she wanted to remove the boredom of being Alsheyra, but at the end there was still boredom, and she could do nothing about that. As she thought of that, she gradually drifted off to sleep. But she never thought someone would get so close to her before she realized it.

(Who is it!?)

She opened her eyes without making a noise. A seemingly slow reaction. In fact, she was reacting with ease to the next move that the person would make.

She never thought the other person's next action was to cry.

"Huh?"

It was a normal girl. Synola didn't sense any traces of her hiding anything. The stirring of a Kei vein could not be masked from the sensitivity of Synola's ears.

(This child.....?)

Unbelievable. A normal girl walking up to her without hiding her presence and she hadn't even noticed her. That was her first time.

"Oi, why are you crying?"

Tears slid down her cheeks as the girl looked at Synola. If she was sad about something, she should go somewhere and cry. If

she wanted someone to comfort her, then why come to interfere with Synola's sleep? And she cried after seeing her, why?

"I'm sorry. I think I'm lost," she hastily wiped her tears.

She looked too young to be in the research institution. Then she must be a new senior student.

"Never mind that, but why?"

"I..... I don't know either..."

She didn't seem to be lying.

"I don't know why but I feel something in my chest, and I can't turn away my gaze....."

"Uh....."

Synola looked into the girl's eyes. Her own reflected image..... that should be in there.

"Huh?"

"What is it?"

"Ah, Aaaaah.....sorry. Nothing," she smiled to cover up the doubt in her, and looked at the girl's eyes again.

The reflected image in her eyes really wasn't Synola. Why.....? Instead, she saw a beast with four legs. Grendan, the Electronic Fairy that was in charge of the Lance Shelled city, the insane

Electronic Fairy that hated filth monsters. Another shadow stood behind Grendan. The other truth of the Lance Shelled City that the family of Almonise was hiding, the other soul that slumbered in Grendan. That was what the girl was seeing. Was this Synola's imagination? She was just a normal girl.

(Is that it?)

Only one conclusion emerged from her pondering. This girl wasn't even a Military Artist, but to be caught in such a fate.....? Or had the genes spread out to such a level?

Regios.....The Alchemists made them to fight the world. The genes of fate. But this was also just something random. Even Alchemists weren't omnipotent. The existence of such a world as this had proven it. Perhaps this really was just something random that had happened outside expectations.

(But if things have become this.....)

"I'm Synola, you?"

"Ah.....Leerin Marfes."

"Uh, if possible, can we be friends?"

If this defenseless girl was caught in a fate that even Synola couldn't fight against.....

(I'll do my best to protect her.)

No matter what that means. And this moment witnessed the real birth of Synola as a person.

Chapter 1: In a broken house

This wasn't the first time she had been in an Academy City, Myunfa Rufa thought as she stood beside the leader.

No Academy City would be very wealthy. Most of its income would have been spent sustaining the livelihood of students and maintenance of facilities. As such, the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang that Myunfa was in usually wouldn't be given VIP treatment. Though she didn't have a map, she knew around an Academy City would be strong Military Artists or another city, which explained the low probability of filth monsters attacking Academy Cities. One probably wouldn't know this truth if one only spent his entire life in one city, but someone had planned the locations of different Regios.

(I never thought of that before I entered the Mercenary Gang.)

Even so, the Mercenary Gang would sometimes visit Academy Cities not to work as hired mercenaries to fight, but to work as teachers. To allow student Military Artists to taste the atmosphere of a real fight – probably just a taste of what was left of a fight though – the previous leader of the Mercenary Gang said that was the best way to teach.

.....Everyone else said it was boring though.

But Myunfa herself had been really busy when visiting an Academy City. Of course, the problem of resupplying was part of it too. Seven years. That many years had passed by since the Mercenary Gang picked up Myunfa. Her strength wasn't enough for her to fight on her own so she hadn't really fought before, but

she thought it incredible that she hadn't died in the past seven years. This thought surfaced in her mind because the Mercenary Gang constantly moved from city to city. They were constantly exposed to the danger outside.

"There're larvae within the investigating area. 500 of them. They've noticed us." An electronic voice broke Myunfa's train of thought.

They were in one of the bus stations on the edge of Zuellni. Myunfa was on the roof of the roaming bus. The vehicle was bigger than a normal roaming bus, built to house the Mercenary Gang. It looked like a moving fortress. As such, it needed three times the normal length of rope to hold it down at the bus station. The Mercenary Gang currently had 43 Military Artists and a number of technicians. The large size of the roaming bus was needed to house these people, their living space, the Dite preparation space and other storage.

No matter how far Myunfa's gaze roamed, all she saw were the multi-legs of the city and the arid land.

But Fermaus, the man with the electronic voice, saw something different.

"Anything~?" the person sitting on Myunfa's left asked. He was Haia Salinvan Laia, the leader of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang.

"I got them. I think the location of my flake is good but I still can't beat the abilities of a genius. She discovered them faster than I did."

Fermaus was the one who had picked up Myunfa. He had looked after her for seven years now, but she had only recently managed to understand how he thought.

Fermaus sighed at the strength of the genius Psychokinesist – Felli Loss.

"If you two fought, who would win~?"

"I don't like this childlike thinking. But.....if our strength was the same, no, if she's at 40 percent and I am at 60, I'll win. She relies too much on her ability. Not like Wolfstein. He's got perfect skill."

"But he's a bit rusty now~" Haia said. He was the leader but he still failed to hide the childish side of him. But Wolfstein.....since meeting Layfon Wolfstein, that side of Haia was more obvious and intense than before.

Myunfa understood. She was about the same age as Haia when Fermaus picked her up, so she grew up together with him. But now, the relationship between them was as a leader and a student. This gap between them made her lonely. However, she could stay by his side with this identity, so she was happy too.

"You still can't win. That's the truth," Fermaus said.

Haia curled up his lips.

Fermaus continued, the shaking of his mask denoting the shaking of his head. "He is a bit rusty, but that is his heart and not his skill. He was once called Wolfstein, yet he isn't any worse than he was even though he now chooses to use a different weapon."

Although the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang was formed in Grendan, out of the three people here, only Fermaus was born in Grendan. Some of the other Gang members entered the Gang while the Gang roamed from city to city. Only the seniors who were about to retire and the 2nd head of the Gang were born in Grendan. Fermaus was the only person left in the Mercenary Gang who was Grendan-born.

The youngsters heard of Grendan's Heaven's Blade successors from the older generation. The truth was beautified and exaggerated, hence, Myunfa didn't think a Heaven's Blade successor was really that strong. She never thought anyone could win against Haia until the appearance of Layfon Alseif. A Grendan-born, former Heaven's Blade successor, exiled from Grendan.

Layfon was now fighting the larvae in a place Myunfa couldn't see.

"But a sword that he can't use to its fullest potential is the same as a rusty katana. It's the fate of giving up."

Myunfa heard loneliness in Fermaus' voice.

When Layfon arrived at the destination on his bike, the ground had already cracked apart, spilling out the larvae. The larvae crawled out of the hard ground like water shooting forth from a broken pipe. They spilled out and spread across the earth.

"I've confirmed it through my eyes."

(150 larvae. The mother and the other larvae beneath the ground show no life signals.)

The larvae had probably eaten the mother and then each other. Layfon stopped his bike and took out the Adamantium Dite. Different Dites were placed in the slots in the Adamantium Dite. The best feature of the Adamantium Dite was its ability to combine and use these different alloys.

(But, tracking again.....)

Layfon put the thought of Felli aside, poured his Kei into the Adamantium Dite and spoke the keyword. "Restoration AD."

A weapon left with only its handle formed in his hand. Numerous steel threads were attached to one end of the handle.

"I trust Felli. I'll calculate the number I have to defeat. You just need to track them with your eyes."

[.....I know]

Whether she had heard of the word "trust" .....or that she was tired of the same conversation, Felli didn't say anything else. She spread the flakes, including the one on her helmet, into the sky.

She knew where her flakes were heading without having to explore her surroundings with the steel threads. Even Layfon found that terrifying. At the same time, he felt a murky feeling in his chest. He dismounted from the bike without cutting off the engine, and he ran his Kei into the steel threads.

In that one second, he clearly felt something murky in his heart. Something heavy in him had slowed down his thought. His body felt all right though. A fulfilled feeling inside him once he got to use Kei as much as he could out here, whereas back in the city, he had to suppress it. But this feeling was exactly the problem.

"I must hurry and finish this....."

His steel threads went hunting for the larvae.

Why is it like this? He knew the answer but the question hovered in his mind. That day..... Loneliness and tension greeted Layfon after the cooperated fight with the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang. One of the reasons revealed itself straight after that fight.

Layfon and the Mercenary Gang were greeted by Zuellni. They went in the city through the entrance in the bottom half, taking off their masks to breathe in the purified air. The people who greeted them were the Student President Karian, Vance, other members of

the Student Council, Harley, the senior Military Artists of the Mercenary Gang..... and Felli. Then came Sharnid, Naruki and Dalshena.

But not Nina.

That was the source of his loneliness. How strange. Nina was the captain of the 17th platoon, and Layfon and Sharnid were the team members. Nina wasn't one to not welcome back her team members. This gave him a really bad feeling. A crack showed on Felli's usually indifferent face. Harley was cheerful as usual, but his countenance was a bit stiff and green. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but he swallowed it and his gaze darted around. That was enough for Layfon to raise the question.

"Where's the captain?"

He had to raise the question. Now that he knew, he had to. Standing next to him, Sharnid also felt that something was wrong. But Layfon didn't push the responsibility to him. His gaze swept across the people before him.

As such, a senior gave a reply to his question. Karian waved and stopped Felli and Harley from speaking.

"She's missing," he said.

Layfon's heart thumped.....it made that kind of a noise.

"What's going on?" Sharnid said, putting his hand on Layfon's shoulder. His voice trembled like Layfon's but in it was calm. He

glanced at Felli. She should know where Nina was up till when she went missing.

".....I failed to find the Captain once she entered the center of the Mechanical Department."

"Meaning she's missing now?" Sharnid asked, shocked.

She nodded. "Her presence suddenly disappeared. I checked the area around but didn't find her."

"How....." Layfon was speechless.

"She might have invaded the very center of the Department. That's a secret even we can't touch," Karian added. "But in that case, we can only give up. It's a place we can't reach. Perhaps there's a failure there. But I can't risk stopping the city from functioning."

A certain feeling rushed up in Layfon.

This had become his responsibility.

Not too much time was needed to defeat 500 filth monsters. The larvae were nothing to Layfon. Although his skill in using the steel threads was only a thousandth of Lintence's..... Lintence liked to describe with numbers and exaggerated them. In truth, with Layfon's level of Kei, he could defeat these many larvae in one moment. Yes, even though his skill wasn't on Lintence's level. The filth monsters rushing towards Zuellni from behind him were

heading straight into a trap. If Layfon was in Grendan, other Military Artists would have taken care of this crisis, but not in Zuellni.

People of high talent were so labeled by others, so they could be used equally by other people. That was the cruel reality. All sorts of policies were created to protect these elites so they could be used for a long time and for maximum potential. Military Artists were people who could die easily, and as such, cities gave them the best protection possible. Many families that gave birth to Military Artists were given wealth and the best living conditions. But that didn't change the fate where they were used as commodities.

The purpose of an Academy City was to nurture elites, not to consume them. That was why any situation with students dying must be avoided as much as possible. Zuellni being attacked by filth monsters was, to any city, the biggest crisis.

[Thanks for your hard work.] Felli's soft voice sounded in his ear.

"Any other reaction?"

[Straight in your path. The information came from the flake on the drone so the Psychokinetic power is lacking. I doubt the accuracy of the intelligence. I can get more detailed information if we get three days closer.]

"I got it. Please return for resupplying."

[Right. Take your time resting.] Weariness filled Felli's voice.

Next.....Running desperately in weariness. The city should be avoiding filth monsters, not attacking them. Did other cities have the same level of confidence to overcome this crisis?

(Because I said so.) Layfon thought as he rode the bike to Zuellni. If he said it out loud, Felli probably would say "that's not true", so he kept it inside him. When he first heard from Karian of the city going on a rampage, he immediately thought of Nina. She had a good relationship with the Electronic Fairy. Layfon had never seen anyone who had a relationship with an Electronic Fairy so good that the Electronic Fairy would fly over for a hug. He had never seen an Electronic Fairy in Grendan. He had wondered whether Zuellni was special because it liked to hug other people, but that probably wasn't the case. Zuellni didn't like hugging just anyone. He only knew Zuellni because Nina introduced him to it. Was it because of Nina's personality or some special ability of hers ? He couldn't think of anyone else who could directly touch an Electronic Fairy. That was why he thought she could do something about it.

Such a weak reason.

If only he didn't think of that. If only he just defeated the filth monsters, solved the looming crisis, and then discussed the reason behind Zuellni's rampage... So many students were here. They had better brains than him. The result would have been better if he had left it to them.....

(All I can do is fight filth monsters.....)

Other people would call him arrogant, but Layfon was good at Military Arts. Till now, most of his time was spent on increasing his strength as a Military Artist. No one in Zuellni had as much strength and experience as him in fighting filth monsters. But being a Military Artist had nothing to do with solving the problem of a city going on a rampage. He couldn't do anything without having first experienced it. However, he had pushed that problem onto Nina, pushed it to her without listening to anyone else's opinions.

(That's true arrogance.)

He tossed away his thoughts of solving this problem on his own . After looking at the fight of the Mercenary Gang..... Layfon thought himself too arrogant.

"Did you.....find senpai?"

(.....) Felli remained silent.

In this heavy atmosphere, Layfon tightened his grip on the handle of the bike.

When Leerin stretched all she wanted in the space she had been

waiting for.....Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside and the door was banged open.

"Don't move!"

"Huh?" Leerin said, unprepared for the gun facing her.

"We're from the City's armed forces. Don't move," one of the people wearing the fighting uniform said. He and the people with him were about Leerin's age.

She had no choice but to keep her stretching pose as she raised her hands.

"Excuse me, please go out to the corridor."

That young man must be the captain. He ordered one of his comrades to remain in the room and he left with the rest of the soldiers. In the corridor echoed the footsteps of leather boots, angry howling and moaning. Only the title of City's armed forces was clearly heard, and any dissatisfaction started calming down. The person in the corridor took Leerin and the others outside. It seemed all of the passengers were caught in a commotion. They were in one of the facilities in the roaming bus area.

"Ah, who would have thought that I'd get caught up in something strange so quickly."

Leerin turned her head at that voice. The silver-haired handsome young man was also taken to the outside by the same person who took Leerin away. But the young man didn't look worried or shocked.

"Ah, better do what that driver says," Savaris seemed happy. On the other hand, Leerin was too busy fending off the pressure on her.

"Seems so," she replied.

The driver was the talkative type. Perhaps he was always driving outside cities, in places without protection, because his attitude was a bit annoying, but he was a nice person. He had said, "Listen up, Mr, Mrs, and Ms.....All passengers. In case, just in case this is your first time leaving a city, then there're some principles you must abide. Even if you find it unreasonable, you must not resist the government of other cities. Isn't that normal? Yes. You must obey the government. Still, you can expect to see habits and laws in other cities that will surprise you. That isn't a problem of being strange. Perhaps they might find your city strange. You may ask why, don't all cities function the same? It's the truth. Understand? It's the feeling of unfamiliarity."

.....Anyway, that driver really talked a lot.

They left the driver this morning, registered themselves, took their luggage and arrived at the designated facility. It was lunch time when Leerin was stretching herself. The passengers probably calmed down by taking notice of what the driver had said to them.

The driver had also said. "You must not make trouble. Any criminals will not be put in jail. Why? Because it's too much trouble. Outsiders are outsiders. Keeping them doesn't gain the city anything. If there happens to be a roaming bus around, the city will put a stamp on the clothes, get the criminals to wear them and exile them, but if the crime committed is really severe, us roaming bus drivers can refuse to take on the criminal. I have to look after my passengers after all. If we refuse and there aren't any roaming buses around, the city will forcefully remove the criminals.....meaning, they toss them away like trash.....that's the way it is."

Humans would die if they stayed outside a city without the air purification system. Forceful removal was the euphemism of capital punishment.

(How can I die here.) Leerin shivered.

They left the corridor and walked down the stairs rather than take the lift. They were taken to the reception hall. No one lived here. There were a lot of people that Leerin didn't know. They probably came here on other roaming buses. They came here to change roaming buses to get to other cities. They were travelers who couldn't even get to cities that they had once visited.

(Yes.....)

Once Leerin took the next bus, she'd be heading to Zuellni. The Academy City where her childhood friend Layfon resided. As such, (I must not be dragged down here.) She vowed silently and entered the reception hall.

This city was named Myath. The city's armed forces surrounded the passengers in the reception hall. Leerin observed the people in the armed forces as she waited and mixed in with the crowd. These people had the symbol of the City Police on their uniform and they all looked to be about her own age.

"Truly an army of kids," Savaris said. "An Academy City is such a strange place. It can function even without any experienced people around."

Yes, this was an Academy City. A city managed by students, just like the city that Layfon was in.

"Very low level, these Military Artists. Seems the rumor of Academy Cities not encountering filth monsters as much is true."

Leerin didn't know that there were Military Artists amidst the City Police. Why? Was this how the police force in Myath was chosen or that something had happened and only Military Artists could solve it.....If it was Grendan.....She lightly shook her head. She had never needed to talk to the City Police in Grendan, so she didn't know what they were like.

"Speaking of which, just what's going on.....It's about time for them to give us an explanation," Savaris said.

The person who took Leerin away to the reception hall spoke. " First of all, I want to thank everyone here for following our orders. "

He had a clear voice, and his manners showed he had had a good education but his eyes looked serious. "The city's in a lockdown because some important information has been stolen. I hope you can cooperate with us and allow us to check your possessions." Despite the reservation in his words, his voice showed he would not take 'no' for an answer.

"We'll check your possessions while asking you of your situation. If you have luggage in the rooms, please bring them out here."

The crowd broke into a groan. They quieted under the sweeping gaze of that young man.

"Important information.....I see," Savaris nodded.

"Important information? Speaking aside....." Leerin looked at the young man. She understood the importance of information from school, so it was reasonable for the city to make precautionary measures.

"What is it?"

"These people look tense."

"Uh?" Savaris observed the expressions of the City Police. It was hard to discern their expressions as the helmets blocked off their faces, but sometimes their lips and heads moved. That wasn't the only thing. Savaris might have reacted slower because he reacted to anything dangerous even in his sleep, but the tension of the City Police was influencing the crowd.

"I see, seems to be the case."

"Why is it like that....."

"Well, we couldn't do anything even if we knew," he said in a relaxed manner.

Feeling as if a cold bucket of water had been upended on her curiosity, she waited for the check with displeasure. She waited for a long time. This wasn't the only facility with living quarters. If other places were undergoing the same process, Myath probably didn't have enough people for the job. She waited while thinking of other irrelevant things, and finally, it was her turn. The tea room in the reception hall was taken to be used as part of the checking process. The tables were taken away and only five were left. Leerin was led to the table on the left hand side to face the same young man.

"Nice to meet you. I'm captain of the 1st platoon, Roy Antorio."

"I'm Leerin Marfes," Leerin sat down. Another City Police member took out the luggage that looked like Leerin's, along with a document.

"Uh....." Roy looked at it then turned to her. "I want to ask a few questions. That might bring you trouble but I hope you can cooperate."

"Sure."

His voice was gentler than when he gave the speech, but it was still the voice of an official. Perhaps he was always like this.

"Where were you born? If possible, please tell me your address too."

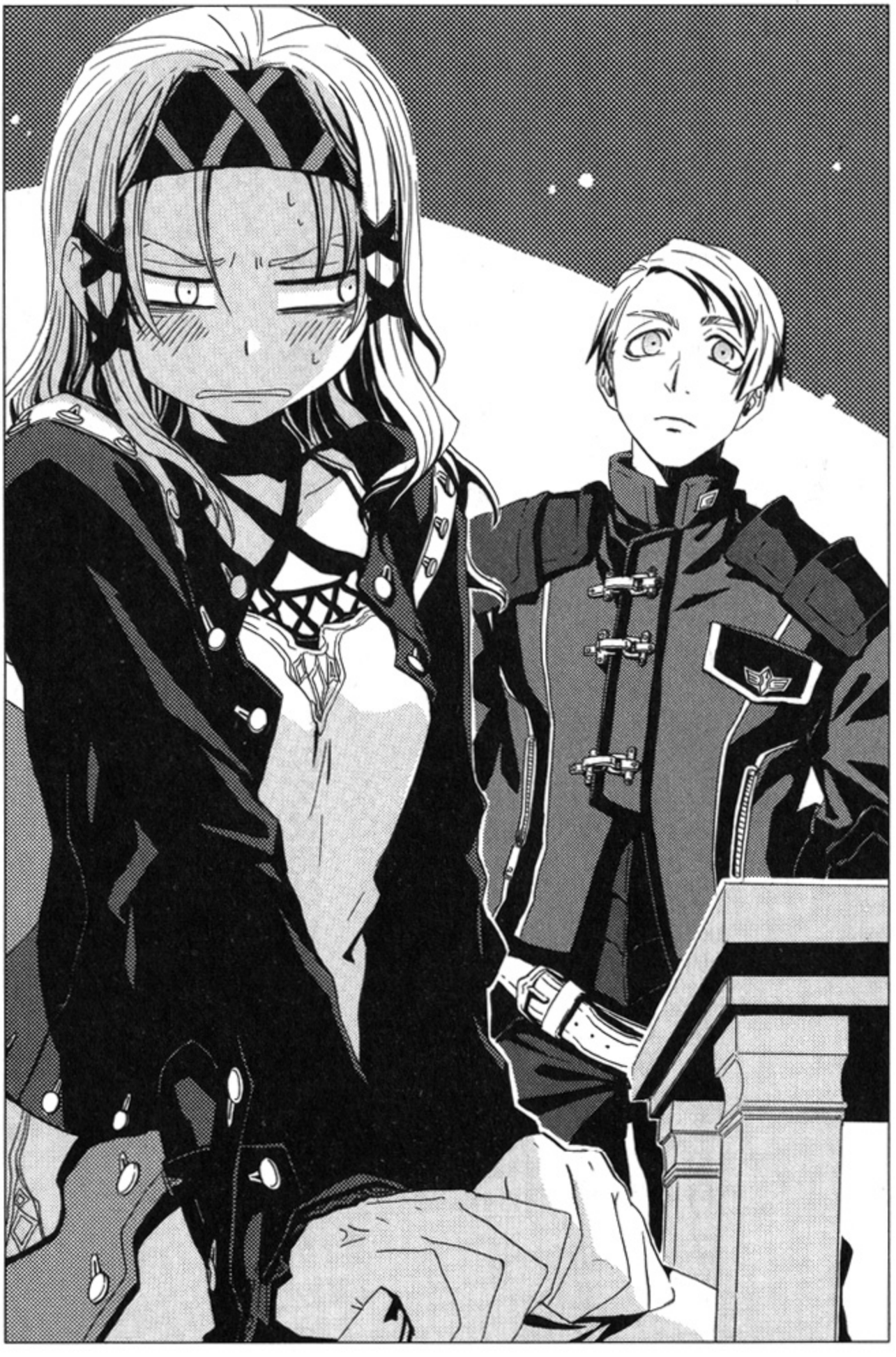
"Grendan, as for residence....." she gave it too but she felt strange about it. They were in Myath. What was the point of giving them her address in Grendan?

"OK," Roy nodded at the document in his hand. Leerin felt relieved.

(Ah, I see. He's confirming whether it's me.)

A document confirming Leerin's identity was in her luggage. Since they checked her luggage, they must have found the document too.

(Wu, they couldn't have checked my underwear too?)



Everyone had enough space to sleep in the roaming bus but it was still just a vehicle for transportation purposes. It didn't have all the conditions to satisfy a good living. Clothes and washing gave Leerin a headache. Water was the most valuable in a roaming bus. There was a simple tap, but the water was cooled by the engine and recycled. Hot water was also made through absorbing the heat of the engine. So it wasn't possible to wash clothes or shower. Besides, water was shared by other passengers. Leerin's clothes smelled.....She couldn't do anything about it though. Other passengers' were the same. Her underwear.....Either way, she had to put up with it. But that was inside the roaming bus. She had already sealed up her clothes in special bags. Since this was a check, the City Police might have opened those bags too.

(Wu.....)

"What is it?"

".....Nothing."

Roy was doing the asking, so he didn't have time to open her bags. Someone else must have done it, such as the person who took her luggage to here. That made her so embarrassed that she wanted to find a hole and hide there.

"Then, to the next question."

Roy looked tired. He had asked the same questions of different passengers. His questions were casual, but sometimes he'd ask some serious questions. Leerin felt tired too.

"Thanks," Roy said, and Leerin sighed.

"I've asked the customary questions. Lastly..... Just one more question."

"Eh?"

He took out something from her luggage.

"Ah....." She had wrapped it carefully to prevent damages, and had put it deep inside the luggage. The box that her adopted father, Derek, had given her. Roy opened it cautiously. Inside was a Dite.

"Is this yours?"

"......I suppose." She thought of how to reply and decided to give such an answer.

"Suppose. What do you mean?" His gaze sharpened. He looked at the document. "You're a normal citizen. Then why do you have a Dite?"

Did he suspect her to be a Military Artist using a fake identity? She calmed herself down and looked at him. ".....I was asked to take this to someone so I left my city."

"I see. To where?"

"Zuellni."

"Another Academy City. Unfortunately, we haven't fought Zuellni for a long time. We don't know the strength of Zuellni. Who are you giving this to?"

"You mean.....?"

"What is your relationship with this person?"

"Uh....."

What relationship. Siblings? Probably, since they grew up in the same orphanage. But Derek, the former head of the orphanage, didn't put down their names in the official documents as his children. He registered them using their own names. Hence, Layfon and Leerin weren't siblings in the official document.

(Childhood friends?)

That should be the safest answer?

"What?"

".....My childhood friend."

".....You took the roaming bus on a dangerous journey just for a childhood friend?"

"That's got nothing to do with you."

"Excuse me," he apologized in embarrassment.

Leerin was angry about it, but it was her first time seeing Roy show an expression other than his official look. Being released from the sweaty smell of the roaming bus, she had planned to relax in her room if not for this sudden event. She was happily planning to have a good shower but was instead taken to the reception hall. And someone else had looked at her underwear. This level of revenge was her due. But the strange feeling of satisfaction was broken in the next second.

"I'm sorry, but we'll keep the Dite for now."

"Why!?"

"I already told you the current situation. I'm not suspecting you but we'll temporarily confiscate all dangerous items."

"......Will you give it back to me?"

"After we confirm you're clear we'll return it to you."

Meaning they were treating her as a criminal. More like a criminal candidate? So rude! She glared at him.

"What proof do you have to do this?"

"That's inside information."

His coldness and the way they were investigating everyone meant the investigation wasn't going well.

"Stop joking!" she said. She hadn't turned away and left. There weren't any roaming buses leaving Myath, and even if there was

one, the City Police would have stopped her from leaving. Leerin gritted her teeth and swallowed her words.

"Then.....Are you done with the questioning?"

"Yes, thanks. You can go back to your room."

"Yeah.....Then I hope you can catch the criminal soon. Though I don't know whether you can do it!!" she spit out her displeasure and stood up. Returning to her room with irritation, she thought back to the question Roy had asked her. Why were the people of Myath so worried? This event.....

Chapter 2: The appearance of a butterfly

He gazed down at the street that he didn't know. The layout of this city was different from Grendan. The buildings randomly stretched to the outskirt of the city. From the layout revealed a city occupied by humans. Only half-assed people could make such a half-assed city.

An Academy City. Only less capable Military Artists were allowed to leave their home city, and leaving did not guarantee growth.

"How refreshing. Ho ho, that is a matter of fact too," Savaris confirmed his location, looking at the unfamiliar street. He stood on the roof of a building. All of the buildings in this area were built quite low. The best place to observe the city was the top of the building in the middle of the city.

"Speaking of which, my brother is in an Academy City too."

Savaris' younger brother, Gorneo Luckens, was in Savaris' next destination – Zuellni. Savaris had used this to back his reasoning for the Queen to send him instead of anyone else, but he had forgotten it while he was riding the roaming bus.

"That spoiled kid just needed to peacefully grow into an adult, but he didn't like his home city."

His expression lacked worry. When he became a Heaven's Blade successor, he gave up his identity and responsibility as an older brother and turned to the path of making himself stronger.

He was the older brother but he lacked the authority to care for his younger sibling. This cold atmosphere of his was real. Leaving aside the thoughts on his brother, Savaris turned his attention to observing the streets of Myath.

"I heard other cities are more peaceful, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

The atmosphere here didn't match the streets. Palpable disquiet hid within the silence. Whether it was in this city or in the city he was about to arrive at, Zuellni, Savaris felt the same thing. He was a Heaven's Blade successor, one of the twelve strongest people in Grendan. Originally, no Heaven's Blades were allowed to leave Grendan as they existed to protect the city, but Savaris had accepted the Queen's order to retrieve the Haikizoku from Zuellni.

The Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang had left Grendan for a long time. They were the ones who brought the information to the Queen that there was a Haikizoku in Zuellni. And Gorneo was the one who asked the Mercenary Gang to take this information back to Grendan.

"The madness of an Electronic Fairy that had lost its city can bestow upon a Military Artist great power."

Savaris was interested in this point, in becoming strong. Although his thinking wasn't wrong as a Heaven's Blade successor , he himself showed something unusual. Savaris did not have the sense of mission to protect Grendan. He fought with all his strength in fights against filth monsters, but to him, that was training to increase his strength. Trial, training, practice. He

continued to train himself in the process and was not interested in anything else. The existence of a Haikizoku could become his strength through more training, and that suited his appetite. That was why he left Grendan. Originally, he wouldn't have bothered even if such strength existed. However, Savaris couldn't ignore its existence because of the present ranking of power in Grendan.

"But I really want to give it a try."

Could he really just borrow that strength.....

"Really worth anticipating, geez....." He thought of that day coming and his shoulders shook. But there was a problem he must first solve.

"So troublesome."

The City Police of Myath had forbidden anyone from leaving the facilities. Savaris wasn't allowed to be here, but the City Police didn't have enough people to monitor everyone's movement. Even so, it wasn't impossible to tour the City in a relaxed manner under surveillance. He wasn't lax as Leerin had thought, he just never paid attention to the youngsters in the City Police. They were only terrified under what they thought were dangerous circumstances. That feeling held no value for him. The air suddenly turned agitated. Something must have happened. For example.....He turned around and saw it.

"So troublesome, but how interesting....."

Directly in his line of sight was a huge pillar, one of the city's legs.

"You can't cover up that sound."

As he gazed at the city's leg, he departed from the rooftop without turning around. It was almost time for the City Police's patrol to come around.

Two days had passed since then. Leerin's anger remained with her. The situation hadn't turned in her favor, and that made her more worried.

"Just what's going on?" she sighed and threw her pillow. She had gone to have breakfast at the appointed hour, returned to her room after that, was never allowed to leave her room before lunch, and had dinner afterward. It was suffocating. But since she was an outsider in this city, she had no choice but to bear with the situation. Still, knowing she had no choice did nothing to stop anger from churning in her stomach.

Having asked about the current situation, she returned angrily to her room and checked her luggage. She had washed her dirty clothes and put them out to hang. The first day flew by her quickly . The second day however, went by slower. She had already finished reading the books she brought with her during the trip in the roaming bus. She didn't have the mood to reread them. Reading them would just remind her of the time Roy took away the Dite. Unable to concentrate, Leerin didn't do anything, but

couldn't leave the room. She was so bored and listless that she wouldn't even turn on the bed.

"Ha....." she could only keep sighing.

Why was she so out of luck.....She could do nothing but sigh. Sighing took her nowhere. Without food, people would look for seeds and plant them in their gardens. Without money, even children would go look for work. Because of that, the orphanage managed to survive.

"Should I find a way?"

About the Dite. Forget what would happen. She first needed to calm that feeling in her stomach. But she would get caught if she went to steal back the Dite. The act would make her more suspicious. In that case, she'd have to make good use of the time she had.

"......Too reckless."

She made an immediate decision. First, she wasn't sure what the situation was about. The City Police said some important information had been stolen, but judging by the high level of tension of the City Police, there was more to the story.....It was an atmosphere that suited that type of event.

"What is it? What's been stolen? That they're so agitated like this ?"

Information was important to a city. All sorts of new research, new inventions, discoveries in a city.....They were essential to allow a city to function more efficiently. Because of the way a city operated, it was impossible to conduct huge trades of materials between cities. The gathering of numerous humans would lure in filth monsters. Hence, most trade between cities was of information. Sometimes there were exceptions like the trading of alloys, but most trades were information trades. People who made their livings in information trading brought information from other cities back to their home cities for profit. As such, information meant a lot to cities and certain rich people. But just what was it that was making the City Police so tense?

"Um.....Perhaps the thing about a information thief is itself a lie. "

If it wasn't information, then.....

".....Could it be a weapon?"

If it was a dangerous weapon like poisonous gas, the problem would be different. Other cities would probably destroy Myath if information on Myath inventing poison had leaked outside. If not, at least Grendan would take action. This was written as law. But poor management would see poisonous gas spilling into the air of the city itself and destroying it. An Academy City probably wouldn't do that.

"So that can't be it."

If it was weapon, the leaking of the information or the weapon itself would cause huge problems, but that shouldn't be the case. Leerin must have been affected by watching too many movies. Her deduction really suited a civilian who didn't have the strength of a Military Artist.

Encountering this unexpected event right after she arrived at Myath made her unable to sleep. She headed for the canteen for lunch.

"Aa, you look horrible," Savaris said.

Leerin wiped her face. "I don't know why but.....I can't sleep."

Being half-asleep really was bad for her. Her wavering consciousness had pulled her to the canteen.

"That won't do. Is it because of the change in environment?"

"I'm not sure."

"Uh, it might be the change in time," Savaris said, happily watching the buffet lunch. Numerous dishes were laid out on the table.

"So much food. I can eat a lot."

He differed from Leerin who had had little food. She drank some juice and lost her appetite.

"It's good to keep some strength. Won't do if you faint on foreign soil."

"That's true, but....." Still, she'd never be able to eat as much as he.....and she'd get fat. But she really did eat too little. Thinking of her amount of exercise, she filled her plate.

"That aside, how much longer is this gonna be?"

Leerin sipped her tea and observed the canteen after lunch. Only the people living here and the City Police were in the room. The chefs had put down the food in the facility and left. People who came in late could only eat from what was left on the table. Not much food was left right now, but that was enough for Leerin.

Roy was one of the Police monitoring the canteen. He was always talking to other people and giving them orders. It was a matter of fact for someone who was a captain. The way he replied seriously did give off the air of a captain.

"We'll probably have to wait till the criminal's caught."

"I want to know when the criminal will be caught."

Leerin turned her eyes to Savaris. They never had much interaction in Grendan, but the trip in the roaming bus had made her feel easier in talking to the Heaven's Blade successor.

"Even I have once cooperated with the City Police, so I'm familiar with the actions they are taking now," he said and blew at the steam rising from the tea cup. He took a sip. It appeared he didn't like the tea to be too hot.

"Usually, only outsiders would steal information. People within the research group in the city wouldn't steal things themselves. They get promoted by discovering new ways to make the city more prosperous. So the criminal must be someone from here."

"I understand that point but....." That was why the facility where Leerin and the other passengers stayed at was being monitored.

"But, probably.....This event is different. They checked the luggage of everyone. The criminal might not be here."

"Then....."

"Or the information they're looking for isn't in a data chip. In that case, the problem is not the same."

"Huh?"

"Meaning they know some information is stolen but they don't know what it is. That's why they're worried. That's the feeling I get ."

"Is that it?"

"What would it be?" Savaris answered in a relaxed manner. His answer confounded her. The City Police had even taken away his Dite, but he didn't look troubled at all.

"Either way, I hope they can resolve this situation soon. If this continues, we might miss the next roaming bus....."

The bus that came after the next bus might not go past Zuellni.

Having drained the cup, Leerin stood up. She didn't really want to drink any more tea, but she refilled her cup. Since the City Police would take her back to the room anyway, she might as well sit here for a while more and enjoy the atmosphere with someone else. And as such, her gaze met a girl's.

That girl was standing in front of the table of food.

(What is it?)

The girl was looking around with a troubled expression. Does she not know this is a buffet? Leerin approached the girl. She did it because the girl was about the same age as her. Most of the passengers were adults, and the youngest was about Savaris's age.

"Can I help you?"

The girl looked shocked and turned to her.

"Ah, nothing....."

Quite a tomboy. She had short golden hair and a neat countenance.

"Knives and forks are over there."

"......I see. Sorry. Thanks," the girl headed for the utensils.

"You're close. If you had come later, lunch hour would have ended."

"Is that so?"

As the eating utensils were placed near the drinking area, Leerin followed the girl.

"Thanks very much. You're a great help. I'm Nina Antalk. You?"

"......Huh?"

"What is it?"

"Ah, um.....sorry. Uh, I'm Leerin Marfes. Please look after me."

Nina's expression changed when she heard that name.

"What is it?"

"No..... Could it be.....But, totally different. No, even so....."

"Uh?"

"Ah, sorry. It's my own problem."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

The two of them laughed.

"If it's ok, can I take that empty seat? I want to find someone to chat with."

"Sure."

Leerin returned to her seat. A strange expression crossed Savaris's face.

"Leerin-san, when did that person appear?"

"Huh?"

She looked back. Savaris was watching Nina.

"Just then?"

"No, I didn't mean that," he said with his chin in his palm. "She appeared the moment you stood over there."

"Did you oversleep?" she said without thinking, but Savaris didn't seem to feel offended. His serious gaze, so different from usual, stared at Nina. Leerin held her breath. The tension between

her and Savaris became more intense. While worrying whether anything was going to happen, Savaris turned back to his normal self and smiled.

"Haha, please don't worry."

"......Don't scare me like that."

She did feel like a fight was coming in that one swift second.

"I'm also suppressing my worries. Anyway, see you later," he smiled lightly and left.

"What the....." She drank to calm herself.

Nina came over. "Your friend left. Is that ok?"

It seemed she was concerned with Savaris. She probably took note of his action.

"He isn't really a friend. We just came from the same city, that's all."

Nina sat opposite her.

"You must feel bored with this sudden event," Leerin said.

Nina's hand that was putting the piece of bread in her mouth stopped. She looked around. "Ah, about that."

That was what she said.

"Yes, the situation is a pain. I came here to take another bus originally."

"It can't be helped with a problem arising in a city," Nina said calmly.

"But it's interfering with other people. The destination won't wait for you," Leerin retorted.

(Is this related to her?) Thinking of that, Nina slowly grasped hold of the situation.

"Is Nina a Military Artist?"

Only a Military Artist would be so stubborn.

"Ah, yes."

"As I thought. I was guessing."

Nina felt like the Military Artists in Derek's dojo. She was female but her words lacked liveliness. Only a Military Artist was like that.

A strange expression daunted on Nina's face. "Is my attitude haughty?"

"Uh....."

It seemed Nina herself hadn't realized.

"True, perhaps I'm more like a Military Artist compared to him, " she lifted her head. "Speaking of which, that man with you is also a Military Artist?"

"Yes. He's strange but he's very strong."

Stronger than anyone in this city.

"Does he not look like a Military Artist?"

A bit flippant.....Leerin shook her head.

"But you can't really tell a Military Artist who is truly strong. I know such a guy. He doesn't look much but when something happens, he's more reliable than anyone else," Nina said with a gentle light in her gaze.

"Uh....."

(It seems she likes that person.) Leerin thought, taking note of the gentleness in Nina's voice.

".....Speaking aside," Nina looked at her after her lunch. " When did this city become like this?"

"Eh?" Leerin reacted at that sudden question. "......What're you saying?"

She put a hand on her forehead and explained her circumstance . "I know this city is in a crisis, that's why I'm here. There's something I must do. It's like I'm suddenly in a dream. Do you

understand? I don't even know the reason behind it, but I must do something. It's a dream like that."

"Eh, eh eh?"

Leerin did have a dream like that.

"I had a dream of making a hundred pies because guests were coming. But in reality, my room isn't big enough to fit so many people....."

It was at the time when she moved into the dormitory of the new school. It must have been the side effect of being released from a huge amount of household chores.....

"I feel like I'm in a dream now."

She didn't understand what Nina said.

"But, Leerin. You've helped me confirm my current location. This is real, and that's when my mission comes to me.....I see. That was why that person appeared before me. "

"She appeared the moment you stood over there."

Savaris's words surfaced in Leerin's mind.

"Just what are you saying?"

That can't happen. A person suddenly appearing out of nowhere. That's unbelievable.

"I know it'll cause you problems, saying this all so sudden, but since I came here like that person, and you've confirmed me, then you might be the one to lead me to the fight."

"As I was saying....."

"Aah, ah.....I see. Yes. Then I don't need to know what's happening in this city. Geez, I got caught in something troublesome."

I'm the one who got caught. Leerin thought. She wanted to sneak out of the room while Nina was talking to herself. All she wanted was to chat with someone of her own gender, but someone strange like Nina appeared.....The voice announcing the end of lunch hour sounded in the room.

"Ah, I have to go," Leerin stood up. Nina nodded lightly but didn't move.

"But he should know where I was headed. Does that mean I still need to know what's going on.....?"

While Nina was mumbling to herself, Leerin left the room with the crowd. She glanced back as she was about to leave the room. Nina was gone. Only the dishes and eating utensils were left on the table.

Zuellni was on a rampage, meaning Layfon was still fighting filth monsters. An unexpected large number of filth monsters were outside Zuellni. Was Zuellni deliberately heading towards filth monster nests?

"Either way, we're in a crisis that we've never faced before," Karian said after the end of the Student Council meeting.

"How did the meeting go?"

"We're at our limit hiding the truth since the situation hasn't alleviated," Vance said, sitting on the guest sofa. "But how do we improve the situation? We can't do much if the problem really comes from the central area of the Mechanical Department."

"True....." Karian put his hands together.

Zuellni on a rampage. Something had happened to the city's Electronic Fairy, and considering what had happened to Nina Antalk, they were sure their speculation was spot on. No one could interfere with how a city moved. The Electronic Fairy itself checked for filth monsters and took appropriate evasive measures. Now that Zuellni was doing something opposite of what it should have done, the speculation was appropriate. Alchemists created

Regios a long long time ago. Humans living in this age could repair parts of the Mechanical Department, but they could do nothing to its central part.

"It must be the Haikizoku.....I don't think it would be strange if that thing is the cause of this."

The Haikizoku. It was originally an Electronic Fairy like Zuellni, but it was twisted by hatred after filth monsters destroyed its city. It had now become a consciousness that held intense enmity towards filth monsters.

"If we had sacrificed Dinn Dee, this might not have happened."

The Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang was here to capture the Haikizoku living in a Military Artist's body.

"No....." Karian shook his head. "It's not right to sacrifice someone to protect the city. At least that's how an Academy City operates."

"But this might cause huge casualties."

"This and that might be two different things. That's the fate we, as living beings, cannot escape from."

"Perhaps."

".....But, is it right to let someone else protect your principles?" Vance asked.

"That can't be."

"True."

Karian smiled at the expected answer. "But do you think he'll accept it?"

A reality they both knew.

"No matter what he decides....."

Karian shook his head again. He wasn't rejecting it. He was just shaking loose the feelings inside him when he thought of that someone. "No matter how strong he is, what one person can do is limited. That's the way it is."

"Yes," Vance nodded with a bitter smile.

"In that case, we'll gather all the platoons and explain to them the situation, and then organize a special team to handle the filth monsters. Is that ok?"

"I'll leave the organizing to you."

"Yeah, I got it."

Karian stood up and watched Vance leave. Now only he was left in the room, the room of the Student President that was situated in the highest place in Zuellni. He could see the whole of the city from up here. Most people who held high positions in a city had a room in a high place. That was the proof of someone with authority.

".....But authority will be destroyed once the earth stirs," he murmured with an 'I give up' expression. "People only have two legs, but the city..... Of course," he returned to the desk and started working on a pile of documents.

The first who fell was Felli. That couldn't be helped. If the City didn't remain vigilant all the time, it might come across a matured filth monster without warning like before. But Felli felt that she must not leave her post even after the crisis had passed. And she had also gone to see Layfon fight, in addition to leading him there. Although he didn't need much of her help during the fight, it still made her tired.....

"Sorry....." Felli said with a stiff face as she lay on the hospital bed.

"It's not your fault," Layfon said. All the guests had left, leaving him and Felli alone.

"No."

Felli's skin was originally transparent white. The loss of blood made her skin shine more, as if she was a doll. She continued talking with a weak voice that seemed as if she'd die any moment. "I remember the feeling I had of the Haikizoku but I failed to detect it in the Mechanical Department. That was my responsibility. So the Captain....."

The explanation behind Zuellni's madness was that it had something to do with the Haikizoku.

"About that, it should be my responsibility. I asked the Captain to go....."

They fell silent. None of them wanted to be comforted. What could they do as compensation.....They wanted to know, but they didn't.

"How strange. I used my power unwillingly, but now I want to recover quickly. I can't calm down resting here."

The sheet covering Felli had creases on it. Results of Felli's anger and frustration.

"I can't tolerate my mistakes. But is that just a problem of pride? Or am I regretting putting that person in danger? I don't know....." she shook her head weakly. Her face was unusually white. She closed her eyes. Her long eyelashes looked wet.

Layfon couldn't answer her. All he could do was sit beside her.

".....I'm just a bit tired. I'll recover once I get some rest. Layfon, you should get some rest too."

"Yeah."

Layfon left the room. His feet took him to the Mechanical Department, stopping at the entrance where he used to go through for his night work. What can he do here? He had come here many times since Nina's disappearance, calling for her and Zuellni. But no one replied. Layfon's voice had echoed in the Mechanical Department before disappearing. He had no clues as to how to

begin searching for the missing Nina. He heard from Naruki that the City Police was searching for her in the city, but they couldn't find a clue. Nina might not even be in Zuellni. When they were informed of her disappearance, they thought she might be outside the city. She wasn't wearing protective gear. The image of Nina being burnt by pollutants sent a chill down Layfon's back. He had searched in the vicinity of Zuellni but had found nothing. Then where was she? What could he do to find her and rescue her.....

(Just what am I supposed to do?)

He must do something. Agitation made him unable to sit still. He had to do something but he didn't know what to do. He felt like he wanted to dig up Zuellni from the city. What can he do?

"Damn!" As if fleeing, he started running without a destination in mind. He ran like a mosquito not knowing where it was flying towards. He could do nothing but run. Nina's disappearance had something to do with the Haikizoku, but he knew nothing beyond that clue. Zuellni's unusual actions were also associated with the Haikizoku.

(Why.....Now!)

If he had handed Dinn over to the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang during the match with the 10th platoon, this wouldn't have happened. Felli wouldn't have fainted. Zuellni wouldn't have headed for filth monsters. If he had handed Dinn Dee over.....

"Damn.....!"

When he stopped running, he realized he was at the city's edge. He had no path left before him. The boundary of this sealed world had stopped his running. But Nina was the one who refused to hand Dinn over. Of course, this wasn't just her own intentions. Karian had also agreed. An Academy City could not let its student die.

"But....."

If they had handed Dinn over to the Mercenary Gang, they wouldn't be facing this crisis now. Everyone thought their actions were right back then, but now Layfon wasn't sure. What was he doing back then? He fought Haia to make Nina's wish come true, and not only that, he also held the weapon that he decided not to use anymore, the Katana. The result was this present situation.....

"Why did I....."

He was like that in Grendan too. He did something shameful as a Military Artist to get money for the children in the orphanage. After being exposed, he was stripped of his position as a Heaven's Blade and was exiled from Grendan.

"Why is the same thing happening again?"

He gave his all for some goal, some person, and reaped a different result? Had he not done well enough? Karian only asked him to win in the next Military Arts Competition to resolve the shortage of selenium mines that Zuellni had. Entering Nina's 17th

platoon was just a part of that plan. Layfon's goal was now different from when he first entered Zuellni, but he thought he could change that goal in the end.

In order not to lose the place that could change his reality...

But.....Zuellni now faced destruction.

(Not yet.....We haven't lost yet.)

He said this to himself. To himself who was in the bottom of the pit called despair. He was reaching up for the rim that was called hope.

(It's not lost yet. There's still something I can do.)

He had to do his best for what he could do, and that was to protect Zuellni, protect the place that Nina would return to. He had to find a Psychokinesist. But only Felli was able to provide him with perfect aid. He couldn't trust anyone else. Felli had provided him support in battles. He hadn't worked with any other Psychokinesists before. Layfon could tell how the larvae worked by taking one look at them, but a Psychokinesist was needed to foretell an imminent attack by filth monsters. Now he had to react by his instinct. Felli had never cut off her support before she fainted.

He wanted to do something but he couldn't. He couldn't think of any other ways.

(I have to ask the Student President to provide another Psychokinesist.)

He turned around and.....

".....Huh?"

Something stabbed him in his chest. Pain flared. A tiny something that looked like a syringe. Layfon's vision blurred.

"What?"

Darkness descended.

Chapter 3: Birds in a cage

A bird was knocking on the window with its brown beak.

"How rare," Leerin said and immediately walked over to the window. It was a bird small enough to fit in her palm.

"A wild bird? Or is this somebody's pet?"

It was rare to see birds flying in Grendan. If a bird was left alone, it might get sucked into the air purification system and die. People could tame birds and train them to avoid the air purification system, but that wasn't usual in Grendan.

Leerin opened the window carefully, making sure not to scare the bird.

"Coming in?"

The bird hopped over the windowsill and entered the room. It flew in a circle underneath the ceiling and stopped on the cabinet by the bedside.

"Come over....." Leerin spread her hands. The bird looked at her fingers and hopped onto her palm.

"If you always do that, someone might catch you and eat you."

She caressed the bird's head and feathers. The worry and frustration in Leerin from being locked in a room vanished. The color of the bird resembled that of tea, but white feathers crossed

its chest to its face. It looked funny when its long tail moved. On the top of its head were golden feathers shaped like a crown. Having enjoyed the fun that the bird brought over, Leerin stretched her hands out the window. A flock of similar birds were on the opposite side of the facility.

"Go back to your friends."

The bird peered out, spread its wings and flew out.

Leerin was still confined in the facility. Every day, she walked from her room to the canteen and back, as if she was locked in a prison like a prisoner. Ten days had passed since she met Nina, but the investigation hadn't made much progress. But..... Irritation rose in her. It wasn't dissatisfaction, but it still filled her up inside. Most of the people in the canteen held the same feeling. They looked around and their conversations became louder and louder. The expressions of the students monitoring the crowd became stiffer and stiffer. Probably Leerin and the other people living in this facility knew nothing of what that portended. For some reason, she just couldn't calm herself. The quality of her sleep had also diminished. The people here would not be able to catch the next roaming bus if the situation wasn't resolved soon. That would be very troublesome. But Myath couldn't possibly hold them here forever. The next roaming bus would bring more people . The increasing number of people detained here would increase the tension at the facility, and food shortages would arise. So, this hold-up would not be long. That was what some of the more schooled passengers said.

However, that person was also peering at the students monitoring them with impatience. Just what was his unreasonable uneasiness .....? Anyone would want some information about the situation.

"Speaking of which, that girl....."

Leerin didn't see the girl named Nina Antalk. Recently, she hadn't been taking long to eat her lunch. She always returned immediately to her room afterwards. Perhaps the name Nina belonged to some passenger. But was she really one of the people living here? The canteen was the only place where Leerin could contact her, but she hadn't seen her for 10 days. What a strange person..... That thought flashed past her. She took care to avoid Nina in the first two days. Noticing that the other person didn't deliberately get close to her, Leerin had felt more relaxed. Still, it was strange that she hadn't seen Nina in the canteen since then.

"Nina Antalk.....Who is she?"

"Calling for me?"

Leerin looked back instinctively at the voice. Nina climbed in from the window where Leerin had let the bird go.

"Ah!" Leerin stepped back from her. Shocked, she lost her balance and fell onto the bed.

"Careful....." Nina caught her wrist.

"Wh, wh, wh....."

"Are you all right?"

"What are you doing!" Leerin said, scolding Nina for her lack of common sense.

"Investigating the city," she replied firmly.

"Ha?"

"I said before that it was ok if I didn't know the situation, but on second thought, I should check it out. Just in case that time comes, it would be more convenient to move around. So I went to do some investigation."

Saying it so matter-of-factly.

"Investigate? .....Eh? .....You mean," Leerin looked out the window.

Nina nodded. Outside laid the streets of Myath.

"Went to check it out."

Still the calm voice.

"It's not my style to sneak around but I had no choice in this situation. I have a good grasp of the current situation."

"Then what's going on?" Leerin turned sideways for the information that everyone in the facility wanted to have.

"This city has stopped moving."

"Eh?"

Nina didn't say anything more. Regios moved on their own, drifting around in this world to escape filth monsters. Human beings once seemed to be in charge of this world in the distant past . However, in the present, humans were only side characters, existing to decorate the main characters.

"Uh, I understand why you doubt that," she glanced out the window behind her. "All the windows here face the side of the city ."

"How can that be....."

It was true, from the window here, Leerin could only see the inside of the city. That didn't mean all the windows here faced the inside though.

"I haven't heard the legs moving. I couldn't see the legs, so it took a while to discover the problem."

"Ah, so....."

That probably explained the source of Leerin's irritation and her lack of sleep. What always existed was gone, and that was affecting her body.

"But, the legs stopping....."

A Regios had stopped moving. She had never thought of that possibility before. It was natural for a city to move.

"I'm also shocked, but that's the truth," Nina said, nodding. " City Police wouldn't have been so agitated if it was just some machinery malfunctioning. The workers told me before that the structures of a city's multi-legs are mostly the same. So that possibility is very low."

"Why?"

"Think. If it were just information theft, would that interfere with the city's movement? If that information was so important, there should have been a backup."

"Ah, true."

"If they really looked for something to steal, it must have been something unique to the city."

"Unique.....?"

"Isn't that obvious?" she said with confidence. Leerin shook her head.

A unique thing of Myath.....

"Ah, could it be....."

A single phrase appeared to her. Something that she had never noticed. But Layfon had mentioned it in his letter.

"An Electronic Fairy?"

"Can't be anything else," Nina nodded.

Electronic Fairy.....The City's consciousness, an existence full of mysteries that people nowadays had no means of creating. And that thing had been stolen.

"But, I don't get it."

Leerin couldn't comprehend it. She had never seen an Electronic Fairy before, hence she wasn't clear of what it was.

"I understand. It's hard to imagine an Electronic Fairy being stolen."

"Yes."

"It's hard for me to accept that. I know it's possible to lure an Electronic Fairy out of the Mechanical Department, but that's all I know."

"Why?"

"Um, because....." Nina planned to explain.....but suddenly shut her mouth and turned to the window.

"What.....?"

Leerin followed her gaze and froze.

"I don't know how they did it, but the Electronic Fairy's trapped ."

"Uh.....You mean.....that?"

An unbelievable sight stood before Leerin. A wall separated the facility and the rest of the city, and above it were a large number of birds, the same as the bird that had flown inside Leerin's room.

".....What's going on?"

The flock of birds struggled madly like a huge creature. Flashes of light surrounded them. The birds called.

"An Electronic Fairy," Nina said and climbed out the window.

"What're you doing?"

"I'm going to help them. That's why I'm here."

She slid out and pushed herself from the wall. The wall vibrated with the push of a Military Artist. Nina's figure quickly shrank and then disappeared from Leerin's sight.

The commotion continued. Leerin could feel the birds' pain. And then the alarm rang in the facility.

Someone outside the door was calling, "Filth monsters!"

Leerin opened the door. People holding their luggage filled the corridor. She quickly grabbed her own luggage and pushed herself into the crowd. Now that filth monsters were discovered, she had

to head for a shelter. Besides, this wasn't Grendan. The city might be destroyed soon.

"Everyone, please rest assured! The Military Artists of Myath will take care of the filth monsters. Please stay calm and head for the shelter! You'll be helping us immensely by doing that."

Roy's announcement might not make much difference as the crowd pushed around, moving out to the shelter.

"Leerin-san," someone greeted her.

"Savaris-san!" Leerin pushed her way to him.

"Let me escort you to the shelter."

"Huh?"

"If I don't keep you safe, someone might get mad at me. This way please," he took her luggage, put her on his shoulder and ran out.

"Wait a minute, Savaris.....san!"

"Don't speak. You'll bite your tongue."

"Uh.....That!" Leerin didn't say more. Savaris kept running. Not on the streets, but on the wall. The streets were full of people. It'd be hard to run fast there, but no one could imagine someone running on the wall. And Leerin was just a normal person.

Savaris ran on walls. He didn't stop even when he met a set of stairs. He just ran around it, rushing all the way to the front of the door.

"Please be calm! The roads heading to the shelters are safe!" Roy shouted from the door.

Leerin had no time to pay attention to Roy. She herself was experiencing something she had never encountered before.

"You're tense. Has Layfon never done this before?"

".....Absolutely not."

"Aaah, looks like you're very important to him."

".....Those are two different matters," she denied, blushing.

"Anyway, I had no choice....." he said.

What he said bothered her.

Roy and the City Police were too busy keeping track of the passengers to look at Leerin and Savaris.

"You said that if you don't keep me safe, you can't report to a certain someone....."

"You still remember."

"How could I forget that?"

"That's troublesome. I would be very happy if you forgot what I said."

"If you tell me who it is, then I'll forget it."

"That's troublesome," Savaris said with a worried expression.

She would have said "never mind" and given up in the face of a Heaven's Blade successor if she was at Grendan. But she was used to the personality of Savaris during the long time they spent together in the roaming bus. She looked at him with an intense thirst for an answer. It couldn't be Derek. As Layfon's master, he probably knew Savaris, but Leerin didn't think he'd do something like this. Speaking of which, she could never imagine a Heaven's Blade leaving Grendan. Derek would also be shocked.

"Someone whom you also know....."

"......It can't be Synola senpai?"

Leerin didn't have that many friends at school. Only one name surfaced when she thought of someone who would know a Heaven's Blade successor.

"Uh, yeah."

Leerin wasn't surprised at the quick admission. She wasn't surprised at it being someone like Synola.

"Why....."

"......Because something happened."

His words became less clear. The droplets of sweat adorning his face failed to escape her eyes.

(Synola must have a hold over him.) She felt sorry for Savaris.

"Thanks for the work."

"No. Not at all. I'm happy to help."

As the two of them chatted, Leerin found herself before the young man wearing the City Police uniform. He led her and the others to the shelter. It appeared that the filth monsters hadn't shown up yet. The sight of the outside of the city greeted her. As the facility was situated at the outskirt of the city, the outside was the first scenery she saw.

The City's multi-legs had stopped moving. Did anyone notice in this chaos?

(Nina said they stopped moving.)

She looked behind her. The flock of birds still flew in the same space, as if they were hiding in the shadow behind the facility. Thin threads of lines flashed around them.

(If the Electronic Fairy is really there.....)

Would the crisis be averted if someone could save the Electronic Fairy and return it to the Mechanical Department?

"What're you doing?" Savaris said, grabbing hold of her wrist.

She stopped walking. The other passengers and City Police had already left.

"Savaris-san, the City's multi-legs have stopped moving."

"I know. I thought this might happen."

She widened her eyes at his curt attitude, but this wasn't the time to criticize his personality.

"The Electronic Fairy is missing from the Mechanical Department. If we don't do something quick....."

"........Um, where did you hear this from?"

"Nina. The girl we saw at the canteen."

"Her? When?"

"Just then, over there," she pointed at the flock of birds. "She said the Electronic Fairy is there."

"Why?"

"Don't you find that strange?"

Savaris's expression turned curious. "True. It's rare to see birds flying outside, but that's because they know there's no pollutants here. They have the instinct that tells them what's dangerous and what's not."

"Then what is that strange light?"

Savaris's expression turned stranger. "There is such a thing?"

"Eh?" Leerin studied the flock of birds again. Yes, there was a strange light around the birds. The birds were still flying in circles to escape it. The light kept blocking their way.

"Isn't the light there?"

"I don't see anything."

He didn't seem to be making it up.

"But....." she saw it. Was it her imagination.....A doubt flashed by her, but the reality of what she saw remained there. She didn't think she had gone insane. Then what was happening here must be real. Besides her.....Nina also saw it.

"Let's go," Savaris reached out for her, but she avoided his hand and ran.

"Leerin-san!"

"Sorry. Please take care of the rest."

He said something, but she wasn't paying attention. She just kept running in the direction of the birds.

"Please take care of the rest....." Savaris scratched his head. " How can I just leave it?"

The Queen gave him this order on the day before he left for Zuellni . She said it in a voice that prevented anyone else from overhearing . "Your priority isn't the Haikizoku, but Leerin's safety. If even a

hair of her was hurt, hehe, I think I don't need to tell you the rest. And you must listen to any of her requests as if they were my orders."

What a messy order. If Kanaris had heard that, she would have been so mad.

"".....If her request would cause her to lose her life, what do I do?" he asked slyly.

"You must keep her safe and also carry out her requests. You've to guarantee both. Where's that air of yours as a Heaven's Blade successor?"

"Nah. I'm not Lintence. I don't have that air."

"Shut up. Just do it your own way."

He was made to follow such an unreasonable order. Since it was the Queen's order, Savaris couldn't just leave Leerin behind.

"So what should I do?"

The Queen wouldn't let him go easily if anything happened to Leerin. Savaris could have escaped to other cities but no other city could satisfy him like Grendan. So, he had to guarantee Leerin's safety and also carry out her requests.

"Uh.....meaning I'll have to handle the filth monsters."

Leerin probably meant for him to cover up her absence when the City Police found her missing, but that would not remove the danger the filth monsters brought to her.

"But if I have to get rid of the filth monsters, I can't leave her too far from me."

Besides, the Queen had said Leerin was not to be hurt in any way. Not even a hair.

"Well, I just have to take care of the filth monsters here."

He looked around. This City relied on a Kei cannon to attack outside filth monsters.

"This might cause me some trouble. I don't have my Heaven's Blade with me."

Without the reinforcement of a Psychokinesist, even Savaris had no idea where the filth monsters were. Compared to a filth monster in its matured form, the huge number of larvae caused a bigger threat under this situation. This would be an easy problem for Lintence or Layfon, who had learnt Lintence's technique of the steel threads.

"Uh....." he thought for a moment. "Interesting."

Had he had such a restricted fight before? Grendan usually sent out 11 Heaven's Blades in fights. Savaris could only spend a

fraction of his full potential in those fights. However, the current situation was different. With this complicated situation, he must protect Leerin alone.

"I see, I see.....The saying goes, 'what can be done is dependent on one's actions.'" His mood swung to a more positive note.

"Well, let's make a brilliant show."

He disappeared.

Nothing obstructed Leerin's way, so she ran smoothly to where the birds were.

"Wa....."

The threads of light flashed around the birds. Leerin could feel more pressure as she drew closer.

"Where's Nina.....?" she kept a safe distance from the light and searched for Nina.

Found her. Not through her vision, but she heard the sound of Military Artists fighting.

"!"

The sound of clashing steel cut into Leerin's eardrums. She instinctively covered her ears and crouched down.

"It really is you guys!" Nina shouted. Leerin could hear her even with her ears covered.

Numerous shadows suddenly appeared before her. One of them was Nina, holding two iron whips.....and the other five people.....

Each person wore a mask resembling the head of a dog, and they each held different weapons. Leerin held her breath. She couldn't tell who was male or female. They all wore fighting suits with their heads wrapped in black clothes and their faces covered by masks.

"Wolf Face. What is your aim?"

So this organization was called Wolf Face, after a creature that had almost gone extinct and only lived in books. Wolf. An animal that had once ran and hunted on the earth.

Leerin didn't know who it was, but one of the masked people answered Nina. "Our goal is the limitless battlefield. We must obtain what is necessary for that goal.....such as the power you also know of. The Haikizoku."

"What! You plan to destroy this city!?" Nina said with shock. Her cheeks turned red. She ground her teeth as if they were about to spill out sparks. She glared at the Wolf Face.

"We're not interested in that," the masked person declared coldly.

Leerin trembled at the coldness that could ignore the lives of thousands of people living in this city.

"You bastards.....People can only live in Regios. How dare you destroy it....."

The Wolf Face ignored Nina's fury. "Regios are not worth mentioning."

"The Aurora Field has made possible the Rigzario belief. We're like ashes before Ignasis's dream," All of the Wolf Face said at the same time in cold voices.

(Can they.....communicate without words?)

The masks covered their faces. Is there nothing behind the mask ? That was what Leerin felt. Something that felt hollow. An empty personality. Lack of emotion in their voices. They didn't appear to be zealots. But their voices were like those from a tape.

"You said.....the Rigzario belief?" Nina said, not swayed by the way the Wolf Face spoke.

"Do you know? Of Rigzario?" they seemed interested. "Right. I see. That's why you're here."

"What are you saying?" Nina said. They didn't reply but spread their weaponless hands.

"Come with us, Nina Antalk."

"Our meeting is sullied by something nasty."

"But the Aurora Field will not deny a fighter."

"We'll fulfill the ultimate aim of Military Artists."

"World peace."

Words that didn't match that dry voice. All of the Wolf Faces held out their weaponless hands to Nina. Their weapons were pointed at the ground. Their hands stretched out to seek comrades. What would Nina do?

"I can't believe you," she rejected them. "There's no soul in your words. I don't know who made you this way or if someone could be speaking through you.....I don't know. But how can I respond to words that are soulless? How could anyone respond?" Her powerful words hammered into them. "Even if I think the same as you, I'll probably become like you in the end. Then I'd be ignoring my will. If Ignasis is the one pulling your strings, then he's only someone who doesn't trust anyone. A coward who doesn't want to be trusted!" Her intense voice smashed against the masks of the Wolf Faces.

"Then....."

"Negotiation has failed."

"Seems so."

The Wolf Faces readied their Dites. Their murderous intent rose quietly, adding a sense of heavy weight to the atmosphere. Nina raised her iron whips.

"I know the Electronic Fairy is there. Since I know why..... no, even if I didn't know, I wouldn't give it to you."

The killing intent became a whirl. Invisible power filled the surroundings and pressed Leerin to the ground.

"Ah!"

(Huh.)

Nina cocked her head in that tense atmosphere. Leerin didn't know why. She wouldn't know. And the battle began.

"Ahaaaaa!" Sudden wind assaulted Leerin and sent her flying, a wind caused by Kei crashing against Kei.

(I'm falling.) Leerin's body turned stiff.

"Huh?" But what met her back wasn't a heavy crushing feeling, but just light pain.

"Are you all right?"

She opened her eyes and saw Roy. "Eh? Eheh?"

Roy had caught her in the air. He lowered her to the ground.

"Why.....Are you?"

"I saw you leaving, so I came over." His face turned serious. Leerin looked at the battle that her eyes failed to follow.

"I never thought this would happen....." He said with a complicated expression. "It's a battle I can't take part in."

Roy could follow the battle?

".....You can see it?"

"Yes. Very intense fight," he replied calmly.

"I see. How is Nina?" Leerin searched for Nina in the battle. This fight bore the fate of the Electronic Fairy, of Myath the city.

".....That girl probably has the advantage. But I can't bet the City's fate on the fight of one person." He took his gaze off the battle and walked off.

"Where are you going?"

"The Electronic Fairy is where the flock of birds is. Then I just need to destroy the device keeping the birds there, right?"

"Ah, I see....." Leerin couldn't do anything even though she had come over here. She ignored the sound of battle and followed Roy.

In order not to get caught in the fight, they took a long way around to where the birds were. Everyone had gone to the shelters, so the buildings here were all empty. Roy opened the emergency exit and walked through it.

"There aren't any other entrances to the shelters. I'll take you through another entrance."

"Ah, thanks."

"I should do this. I found out what was going on because of you ." His official attitude remained unchanged. They walked on a curved road.

"Ha, Ha.....So far....."

Roy wasn't tired since he was a Military Artist, but it was taxing for Leerin. She wasn't good at sports. Her stomach hurt from having to run and walk and run again.

"Are you all right?"

"".....Yeah," she said with resentment, looking at Roy who wasn't even panting. The birds above them continued to struggle. Their voices rent the sky apart. Leerin regulated her breathing and looked around.

"The device should be around here somewhere."

"Yeah, I hope so."

"Anyway, let's go and have a look."

They were several buildings away from the fight, but she could still hear the sound of steel clashing. She and Roy began searching for the device. Around them was a wall that stretched into someplace distant, a road bordering that wall and bushes that lined the road. Leerin searched among the leaves for anything that looked suspicious. Roy was also searching but it didn't seem like he had found anything.

(Can it be.....) An idea flashed past her. But it wasn't possible. Roy is part of the City Police. Anyway, right now, she should look for the Electronic Fairy.

"Found it!" Roy said. He was opening the lid of a drain. "This must be one of the devices causing this phenomenon."

A device that Leerin could hold in her two hands sat in the drain. A cable was connected to it.

"We just need to destroy this, right?" Leerin said.

"No need to destroy it," he said, grabbing the cable and unplugging it from the device. Smoke and sparks issued from the device along with some noise.

"Just had to stop the flow of electricity."

Leerin never thought of pulling the cable. Ignoring Roy's childish expression, she looked at the sky. The sound of wings beating above her. The light had disappeared. The birds scattered to gather in a new place. Birds surrounded Leerin.

"Ah....."

The bird that had flown into Leerin's room was also here. She recognized it because of the golden feathers. That bird flew to stop on her shoulder.

"Myath....." Roy said numbly.

"Huh?"

"This is Myath."

"This bird....." The bird on Leerin's shoulder was the Electronic Fairy. Because the flock of birds was trapped, so it.....

"I see....."

"Yes, we must return Myath to the Mechanical Department," Roy reached out his hand.

A split second.....

"!"

The bird's eyes flashed. Roy's fingertip turned black. Black blood dripped from where the skin was cracked. The small weight on Leerin's shoulder swayed and the bird toppled. She hurriedly caught it in her hands.

The Electronic Fairy had refused Roy?

"You....."

"So troublesome." There was still a painful expression on his face. He stretched his hand to her. "Can you return it to me?"

"I refuse," she took a few steps back. She had wanted to just turn around and flee but she knew he would catch up in no time. "I won't give it to you. I'll take it back to the Mechanical Department. "

".....I can't let an outsider take it to the Mechanical Department. Hurry and return it to me."

Leerin slowly backed away. "The Electronic Fairy's refused you. You're hiding something."

Roy's expression turned calm. "……How do you know?"

"……Because you can see it."

The light that surrounded the birds……Leerin could see it but Savaris couldn't. Everyone else was the same. It was a very intense light……caused by the filth monsters' attack? That wasn't enough to solve the problem. Only Leerin and Nina could see that light, and the only person left who could see it must be the culprit.

"I see. Looks like I made a mistake," he said without any feelings.

"Who……Who are you people?"

"That's my line. What's your aim?"

Confusion caught her.

"You have no Kei vein. You are neither a Military Artist nor a Psychokinesist. Why are you in the Wheel of Fate? The sealed world made by the Alchemists? You're just a normal person."

"How……"

How should I know! Without even the time to shout that out, Leerin ran off with all her strength.

Chapter 4: The Katana without an owner

Tension that could explode at any moment filled the hall, the largest building that could house all the teachers and students. The biggest difference between this place and a war field was that all space was occupied by chairs. The space was also adjustable through a mechanism built into the building. The floor would become sets of stairs during entrance and graduation ceremonies. The floor would become chairs when it was a famous speaker giving a speech, student polls, and any other events. Right now, the floor remained unchanged. The heaviness of the students and their chatting choked the air.

The chattering ceased suddenly. A person had appeared on the stage. Silvery hair – Karian Loss, the Student President. The many screens above him were switched on to show his image the moment he appeared on the stage. As usual, he wore a confident and sly smile that caused the students to once again raise their noise.

"Everyone....." Karian's amplified voice drowned out the noise. "There isn't time to explain everything, so I'll simply convey to you the current situation."

The topic that had attracted everyone's attention was the situation of the city. The movements of the Student Council had been in a fluster since the end of the platoon matches that were conducted for the selection of platoons to enter the next Military Arts Competition. Everyone thought the Student Council had noticed that another city was near. Military Arts Competition..... What was called a war that didn't take place in a competition zone.

The opponent's entire city was used as a war facility, and that was the same with one's own city. Of course, people weren't allowed to destroy key facilities that sustained a city's operation. One would set out the boundary of war zones according to those rules.

"The City's hiding something. Your room's on the edge of the city. It should be noisy every day."

Seniors and juniors talked in low voices. Other students also began to talk among themselves. However, even the commotion failed to conform to that of an atmosphere created from the discovery of another city. Rumor then came of several platoons gathering at the Student President's office. Their subsequent actions were filled with agitation.....And all kinds of rumors spread. For example, the threatening mystery that lived in one of the facilities. For example, that mystery had something to do with the 10th platoon. For example, filth monsters were close by.

"You've probably all heard of some rumors. Some of them are real. Some are false. Allow me to explain."

Silence descended on the hall. Karian breathed in deeply, "Our city is currently in the middle of a group of filth monsters."

Small chatter. No huge commotion. Karian thought there would be people wailing and moaning.....but he understood immediately . It seemed nobody could imagine such a crisis. Light crying sounded from somewhere in the hall while they all waited for him to explain the details. At first, they were just a few girls, but even the boys couldn't suppress their emotions. Friends and lovers hugged each other. Many people had tears on their faces.

This wasn't a situation that normal students could face. Karian knocked on the microphone. The shrill sound from the amplifier echoed in the hall.

"Everyone, it's too early to fall in despair."

The crying sound softened.

"Yes, we're only students. We're immature, but we also have our Military Artists. People who can protect this city."

Platoons with Vance in the center of them replaced Karian's image on the screens.

"All platoon members know the current situation. They haven't yielded under it but rather vowed to fight through this difficulty. Are you going to send them off with this expression – while they fight with their lives for Zuellni? I absolutely will not tolerate this!"

Karian's image once more filled the screen. His serious pupils pierced all students in the hall. The crying completely stopped.

"Everyone.....Perhaps we're just normal people. We can only wait in shelters when our city's attacked. But because of that we must trust our Military Artists. We can only send them off to the life-threatening arena. We can only do that." Karian didn't look at anyone below the stage as he left.

"Still, what bravado."

Vance was waiting in the control room.

"But it's the truth for them. You don't understand as a Military Artist."

"We're the same in terms of feeling powerless. Forget your speech, but it does work somewhat for the other Military Artists."

Many of the Military Artists back in the hall were not in the platoons. At first, they were also agitated like the other students, but calmed themselves after listening to the speech. Karian could feel the gratitude in their eyes.

"If that can unite our will, then it would be very fortunate."

Karian glared at Vance, noticing the sarcasm in his words. " Aren't you pessimistic?"

"My first time seeing such a strict training manual. Hard to follow even though I want to. I fully understand that I'm too naive. "

Karian had asked the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang to train the platoons in fighting filth monsters. Paying the Mercenary Gang to fight wasn't a long-term strategy. Earlier, he only did it because of the urgency of the situation. Since this situation wasn't as urgent, the platoons were to fight, and that meant they had to undergo training. Haia had agreed to the request.

"Of course we'll accept such a safe job~"

That was what Haia said, but Karian was uncertain of the outcome.

"Can they fight now?" Karian asked.

"We did the course on team coordination in the time that Layfon bought, but they still think it's not enough," Vance said.

"We don't have much time left."

"I know. I'll do my best."

"We've to win."

"We'll win, even if it's just for myself."

Karian watched Vance with his fist gripped tight. A smile adorned his face. "To bet on the honor of a Military Artist, that's what I wanted to say.....Very good." Vance responded to that unexpected praise with an "I have no choice" expression.

"What? Praising me?" Karian asked.

"It's creepy how you were so honest with your words."

"Ah, because you don't fully understand the meaning of what you just said."

"What do you mean? .....Never mind that. I'm leaving the fate of the entire city to your people. I'm counting on you."

"I know." Karian patted Vance's stiff shoulder and escorted him out of the control room. The next wave of filth monsters was very near. Vance and the platoons were currently undergoing intense training with the Mercenary Gang. Karian confirmed the time. Most of the students should have already left the hall. The time for rest had ended.

"Then.....Time to solve the next problem."

Karian headed for the building of the Student Council. Many Resting Rooms were built into the building. He had a habit of using one since he always had to work overtime due to a busy schedule. He walked into one of the Resting Rooms.

"What do you mean?" His voice was full of anger.

Karian thought his judgment was lacking when he received the report of Felli fainting. He had let Felli go out to help Layfon when Nina disappeared. In the time when the city was on a rampage and the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang was training the platoons. Layfon would have fought the filth monsters to protect the city even without Karian asking him. He knew that once he saw Layfon's expression after hearing of Nina's disappearance. But he could not allow Layfon Alseif to fall simply because the city had gone insane. All platoon members must receive training against filth monsters to buy some time. At that time, he made a swift decision and left Layfon's reinforcements to Felli. No, Felli would have done it even without Karian's request.

Those two needed to rest. Karian's calculations were off a bit but it wasn't at the stage where the situation became irreparable.

"You wouldn't have listened even if I talked to you. I think you need rest."

Layfon was standing by his bedside. He was sleeping on that bed just a moment ago. Sharnid's anesthetic bullet had hit him. The medical team had then carried him to the bed and he had slept for a week. The team worked to prepare for this day.

"We did a check up on you while you were asleep. The injury on your back isn't healed. It should have healed up, as you're a Military Artist, and that really makes me angry."

"It was just a scratch."

"Even so, it'll become troublesome if it doesn't heal right. So I ordered you to rest. I hope you listen to me. As for what to do during this time.....I believe you've already heard something?" Karian's gaze moved to the screen in the Resting Room. Nothing showed on the screen, but Layfon should have heard his speech in the hall.

".....The Captain's there," Layfon said, looking at the blank screen with hope in his eyes, and Karian felt guilty of having to crush that hope.

"It was recorded. Just did a bit of adjustments on it. Nina Antalk's whereabouts remain unknown."

"!"

Regret, anxiety, bitterness, anger pointed at himself.....All sorts of negative emotions twisted Layfon's face. Karian controlled himself and suppressed the complicated feelings inside him as Layfon lowered his head.

".....I'm not allowed to stay here."

"Who wouldn't allow you? Not me? You think it's Nina Antalk? Do you think she's the type of cruel captain to force an injured subordinate to fight?"

"No!"

"Then who's not allowing you? Layfon Alseif."

"That is....."

Karian stood up and continued his interrogation. He had to say this to prevent Layfon from returning to the front lines. He had to nail his weakness.

(She should be the one to do this.)

Nina Antalk. But probably even she herself couldn't do it, and it wasn't just her. Any Military Artist would be the same.

"I'm saddened that no one has said this to you."

"What.....?" Layfon looked at him as if he was peeking at something. The relationship between the two of them turned

delicate. What was this guy doing in a situation where he might lose his head any minute? Karian wasn't fearful of that. It was Layfon.....But Zuellni wouldn't see tomorrow if Karian didn't do something to fix Layfon's weakness.

"The other Military Artists probably don't say much to you. You're too strong. Power overpowers everything. People don't care about your personality as long as you're strong. As long as you don't affect the normal operations of the city. For example, when you were in Grendan."

"!"

How come you knew? That thought showed in Layfon's expression. That was, however, very simple logic for Karian. Layfon only participated in underground matches. No city would have exiled him because of that reason.

"You're too reliant on your power."

Karian knew of this at the time when he read Layfon's application to enter Zuellni. General Studies. Layfon didn't know exactly what he wanted to do with his life. He had already reached the highest peak on the path of a Military Artist. Zuellni couldn't teach him anything more. But it was different for him as his goal had been rejected by everyone in Grendan. As a result, he had arrived at Zuellni without an aim.

"Why? It's because you don't have a reason to fight."

"I already knew. I didn't come here as a Military Artist," Layfon growled. His anger was full of murderous intent, showing that Karian had nailed the head of his true feelings.

".....But, if not for you."

"You're right. I forced you back into Military Arts. I don't regret my actions. We do need your strength."

"Then....."

"Because of that, I hope you can use your strength more efficiently."

"Efficiently! Do you mean for me to stay here and wait for filth monsters to eat me?"

"The result's the same if you overwork your body. You need to rest. Back to the topic."

"What topic....."

"Don't run away, Layfon-kun."

"Run away.....I'm not....."

"Nobody would want to be trapped in a situation he himself finds hard to deal with. I forced you into Military Arts against your will. There shouldn't be a problem now if you were the person described in the report I received, but reality is different."

Waive all school fees. According to Karian's original prediction, someone who was particularly stubborn about money would have accepted his offer. He might even request for extra compensation. But Layfon didn't do that. Why? An opportunity to understand Layfon came up. What was Layfon Alseif like? And the conclusion revealed itself in Layfon's attitude towards the commotion caused by the illegal drugs.

"....."

"You're outside of my predictions. Someone even more innocent . Your reason to become stronger is also beyond my predictions," Karian paused and breathed in deeply to hook Layfon's attention. He had used the same technique in the speech he made in the hall, but this action held a different meaning for Layfon. Someone who had failed and waited for the last strike.

"You're making other people shoulder your reason behind your fight."

Layfon's expression twisted.

"Whom did you blame for your failure in Grendan?"

"No, I'm fighting for everyone....."

"What mighty thinking.....But, can anyone really fight for people he or she hasn't met? 'Everyone' means good friends, lovers , your basis of life. You probably mean these people, but who made you think like that?"

"Ah.....Uh....."

Silence. Karian had also anticipated it. The shadow of dissatisfaction had disappeared in Layfon after his battle with the larvae. Karian observed this in the platoon matches and in Layfon's battle with the filth monster in its aged phase. Just who had changed him? The answer came easily when he connected the two.

"Nina Antalk's the reason that you fight. You're uneasy due to her disappearance."

It wasn't romance. Not friendship and not the relationship of comrades. Nina Antalk's strong influence had unconsciously caught Layfon's attention and drawn him over.

"Uh....."

"Your action wasn't driven by the city's crisis. Another point is also important. You try very hard, but your effort means nothing in terms of searching for Nina Antalk."

A fatal strike. Layfon sat down on the bed. Karian regretted a little, wondering whether he had gone overboard. But there was no other way. Under this situation, he had to nail down Layfon's weakness.

".....Nina Antalk is still missing. We don't know what we can do to bring her back. If you truly want to protect the place that she can come back to, then follow my orders. A situation that needs you will arise."

He patted Layfon's shoulder.....didn't say any comforting words, and left the room.

"But, if possible....." he seemed to want to say more as he opened the door. He hoped the wish could be granted, but that wasn't something he could give.

The door wasn't locked. Layfon could leave anytime he liked, but he remained inert. He's relying on Nina's existence.....? He wanted to deny it but abiding by Nina's decision was the truth.

(Because she's the captain.....)

Was he defending himself? Is it wrong to obey the captain's orders as a member of team 17? There shouldn't be anything wrong with it.

(But perhaps it's true.)

At the time when he was exiled from Grendan, the children at the orphanage looked at him as if he had betrayed them. That was a huge shock for him. He really did lose his reason to fight at that moment. His demand for himself had been denied, and he felt foolish for the improvements he made in Military Arts, which was why he came to the Academy City. He had no clear goal and direction. He held an indifferent feeling for and cared nothing for Zuellni. He had wanted to head for a shelter rather than fight when Zuellni faced the larvae's assault. He fought because.....

(Because of Leerin's letter.)

And that wasn't it. Leerin's letter sparked his action. She confirmed that what he did in Grendan wasn't meaningless. She had acknowledged his goal in Military Arts. And what else was it that kept him burning? Military Artists' principles to protect the city? Layfon cared nothing for it at first. In Grendan, he only fought to earn money to help the orphanage. Then what made him decide to protect Zuellni? Protecting Meishen and the others' future. Hoping that one day he could melt in that light of theirs. Why did he think so?

"What is the purpose of our power?"

This question came to him. A feeling as if he had found the goal he lost, as if he could find it if he kept searching, but once again, he lost it.....

"But what should I do next....." he hugged his head. He didn't know, and that was why he searched for Nina.

Sweat drenched his hair. Anxiety filled his helmet.

"Ah, I can't calm down," Sharnid said as if he was speaking on behalf of everyone here. This was his third time wearing a protective suit at a distance so far away from the city. In all the other times, he only wore fighting suits for mock training inside the city. For most of the other people, this was their first time heading so far outside the city. And this was also their first real fight. But it probably was Sharnid's first time too. His previous

fight with the filth monster in its aged phase was more urgent than now, but his responsibility back then was to take up the rear, not to really get involved in the fight.

"But that wasn't easy either."

The gear used outside the city was lighter than what they trained with. It was the same gear used when Sharnid went to investigate the ruined city. The protective suit had good ventilation. Still, it was hot. He felt as if his throat was heating up and steaming. A tube inside the helmet allowed him to replenish the water he needed. The temptation to drink up tickled him..... But he pressed it down.

"Never thought you'd look so listless," Dalshena laughed mockingly.

"I envy you. How can I be full of confidence like you?"

"That is the basis of what makes a Military Artist. How can you easily let other people see your weakness?"

"Is that so?"

"Of course. You lack the qualities of a Military Artist. A Military Artist would naturally do all he can to protect the city."

"Naturally.....Ah."

Probably. In truth, only Military Artists could fight filth monsters even though heavy weapons like cannons were placed on the city's edge. Those weapons should help somewhat against

the thick filth monster shells. Still, that help was limited. Using them without strategies would mean the quick depletion of the city's resources. Hence, the cannons were only equipped in case of a scenario where they were needed. Taking that into account, Military Artists made up the biggest fighting force of a city.

(Naturally. Rather, you could say it's because we have no other choice.)

That explanation could only alleviate some of the tension. Still, there were people who hadn't yet prepared themselves with determination.

"For the sake of the city.....Compared to that, it's more understandable to fight for someone. For example, me, I fight for my lovers."

"So you do hold the photos of all your lovers."

".....I just need to hold your photo and no one else's."

"Go die."

"You're so cold. This might be my last time with you."

"If it's you, you'd probably live, along with the cockroaches," Dalshena said icily, and turned around and left. Sharnid shrugged, then checked his watch. Not much time was left from the time the Psychokinesist predicted.

"Then as you wish, I'll do my best so I can live as a cockroach."

And the order conveyed by the Psychokinesist came through to all platoon members. The platoon members took out their Dites. Light sighing could be heard all around them. The battle had begun, and that message was sent to Zuellni. All students in the Military Arts course had been gathered as Zuellni's last shield in case filth monsters got past the platoons.

Far away from the students in the Military Arts course, Layfon stood alone on the roof of the Student Council's building. The city held its usual peace from a viewpoint high above anything else. However, the atmosphere wasn't as lively as before. All of the students left behind had entered the shelters.

Layfon's weapon harness was empty. The student who delivered his meals told him the Student President would hold his Dites temporarily. The Sapphire Dite. The Shim Adamantium Dite. The Adamantium Dite. All of them. The Student President didn't want him to make a move.

(He's serious.....)

Karian's determination to keep Layfon away from battle was apparent by not returning the Dites to him even under this situation. Layfon was a bit uneasy with Karian's action. He recently had a feeling of fear from not doing anything.

"I have nowhere to run....."

What could he do even if he ran away? He did tell Meishen that he would return to General Studies after Karian graduated, but he had now lost that confidence.

"Am I someone who can't do anything without the Katana?"

Another way to put it was from the moment when he was born.

"What do you think?" he turned around.

Felli was here. "That kind of thing....." Her face was still pale. It might have been caused by her overuse of Psychokinesis. Nina was the same before.

"I'm sorry for making you fight with me."

Felli shook her head. The wind blowing past the roof made her hair dance. She turned her head to keep the hair smooth and quietly moved over to his side. No weapon harness hung on her waist.

"They took it away at the hospital. I was permitted to leave my room but they banned me from using Psychokinesis."

"I see....."

"I can still use it even without my flakes. I don't have to use the flakes in a battle to support Fon Fon," she said, watching the city as she pressed down on her hair with a hand.

Layfon looked at her with a "what're you planning" expression.

"But it doesn't have to be that troublesome. I know the approximate location of my Dite," she continued before he could respond. "I can restore it from a distance. I can even tell you accurately the number of scales on a filth monster."

"Felli....."

"What?" Her hand was still on her hair as she turned to him. "I'll grant your wish. It's not because of someone's order. It's not forced . I'm not doing this for the city. My actions come from my feelings to work with you."

Meaning she wanted to aid him. But.....

"You don't have to."

"Why?"

"Felli, you haven't fully recovered. Don't force yourself, and....."

"And?"

"I don't have the confidence to hold a Katana right now," he lowered his gaze. Karian was right. Even if he held a Dite now, he probably couldn't take any real action. But perhaps he could do something if he did hold a Dite. He felt that influence from Felli's words. She'd fight even though her body was not in a condition for her to fight.

".....I see."

There wasn't any disappointment in her voice.

"In truth, I'm a bit lonely."

"Huh?"

Felli's gaze turned to the outskirt of the city. Layfon didn't know whether she could see that far without using Psychokinesis, but she said with a frown, "I said before that I have to use Psychokinesis. I don't wish to become a Psychokinesist, but my body makes me. I really don't like that. I also don't like my brother forcing me into Military Arts."

Yes, she did say that.

"But when I am told not to use Psychokinesis, I feel unexpectedly lonely. Even though I know this is just for a short period of time."

Her pair of eyes looking so far away did feel like they had lost something.

"Fon Fon, our bodies were born to fight. It's a reality that we can't turn around. So we have to fight, or you could say we have to fight because of this body.....What do you think?"

"About that....."

How could he know.

"But what I can confirm is....." She was still looking at the outskirt of the city. "The people over there are weaker than us. Have they already found their answer?"

The immature Military Arts students who fought desperately against the larvae. However, they did not run away. They gathered and did not abandon their battle.

"Have we been abandoned?"

"If that's the case, we....."

Darkness filled their future. Layfon shook his head as if he was shaking off that image.

"I don't want to admit it.....But, that person is essential to us."

Nina Antalk. She had what Layfon and Felli lacked. Especially.....Felli didn't know.....The reason that Nina attracted Layfon was because she had the determination to sustain her will. Something that Layfon didn't have?

"I hope she can return."

"Yes," Felli nodded, and.....The atmosphere in the air suddenly changed. A sense of danger pierced Layfon.

"Eh?"

"Go inside the building! Hurry!"

He pushed Felli from behind and looked up at the sky. The air spun like a whirl inside the air purification system. A huge creature appeared above Zuellni after the whirl dissipated. At a place where no battle preparations had been made.

"Filth monster....." Felli murmured, having lost her chance to run.

".....Oh no."

The fear of death from Layfon's memory surfaced. A body like a lizard with strong hind legs and front legs that were smaller and shorter. A long neck sustained a head with a horn for assault purposes. A horn to pierce the sky. A pair of gigantic wings allowed the body to stop in mid-air. A matured filth monster.

Layfon couldn't tell which phase it was in. It stopped in the sky as it surveyed the city. A filth monster that was more ancient than the one that Layfon and the other two Heaven's Blade successors had fought.

(Can't win.)

Just by standing here.....The pressure on his entire body caused him to instinctively make that conclusion. He couldn't win even with a Heaven's Blade in hand.

(I see. This is the real thing.....)

This should be dealt with by the Queen of Grendan.

"Human.....The human being who foolishly broke the boundary. Why are you here?"

But what was more unbelievable came next.

"The filth monster.....spoke?"

"Stop. Bring me your leader, else I'll eat you."

The filth monster's voice drowned out Layfon, its voice covering the entire city, a voice filled with rationality and deep hatred that numbed Layfon's entire body. The city's movement stopped as if it was responding to the filth monster. The filth monster nodded at the shrill sound of metal clashing against metal that resounded through the city.

"Good. The messenger has already left."

The filth monster vanished from above.

Chapter 5: The center of the world

Leerin ran in the unfamiliar city. She ran and ran till exhaustion caught up to her and made her stop running.

"Ha, Ha....." She panted, her lungs tightened in need of air. Her stomach hurt as if it were twisted.

"I.....I don't.....exercise enough....."

She had been sitting everyday in the roaming bus, and that fact hadn't dawned on her when she requested to leave the city. Now she didn't even have enough strength to smile bitterly.

"Aaah, already done?" Roy smiled, standing ten steps behind her. This was the same distance between them when the chase began.

"Sorry, I can't do much about my strength....."

"Yes. It's good to exercise sometime! You can also cut back on some fat."

".....Shut your nonsense!"

"Excuse me," he stopped laughing. He wasn't the young man Leerin saw before. His twisted expression was revolting.

"Isn't it about time to give up and hand that thing over?"

She still held Myath, the Electronic Fairy that had the same name as this city. The bird could have escaped far away by flying off, but it stayed in her hand, inert as if it were sleeping.

"It's useless! It has used up its strength inside the barrier. It can't move. It's half dead! You understand what would face this city if the Electronic Fairy died.....?"

The death of an Electronic Fairy was directly linked to the death of a city. A Regios that couldn't move would not be able to escape filth monsters. It'd be consumed sooner or later. Leerin trembled at that possible future.

"What do you Wolf Faces want?"

"If you were a Military Artist, things would be so easy!" There was a mask in Roy's hand. "Once you wear this, you can see the world that Ignasis wishes for. You can see the Dream of Ignasis," Roy said, half wearing the mask. "World peace can be achieved when the majority of Military Artists hold the same dream."

How unconvincing. How pretentious.

"The Electronic Fairy is needed to stop the fate of continuous fighting between filth monsters and Military Artists. That's why we must move numerous Electronic Fairies to Senou. I came here to find En."

"What's En?"

"The network of Electronic Fairies. It shows the genealogy of them. Electronic Fairies can find Electronic Fairies of other cities through En, and it can also tell whether other Electronic Fairies belong to the same category as itself. Schneibel and Myath belong to the same genealogy. So I must catch Myath to obtain the En."

"It's ok to do that even to sacrifice this city?"

"Yes, it's a necessary evil."

"You, you live in this city, don't you?"

"Yes, so?"

"......This city might disappear. Don't you feel anything? Aren't you a Military Artist?"

"Ho, hooooooooo....." Roy laughed. "Who cares! How do you look at an Academy City? Same as others, right? That's not good. This isn't a permanent home. There's no value in protecting it."

"How dare you say this.....The people here are normal students! "

"The principles of Military Artist? Humph!"

Deep hatred showed on his face. "Is there meaning in it? Fear! Pain! The hell of Military Arts! Bastards who push these things to us so they can survive! Their lives or deaths have nothing to do

with me!" the hatred twisted his face more. "Those guys who only look for the results and care nothing for our effort! Those bastards! "

Who did Roy hate? Who was Roy being angry with? Insanity and madness spread across his countenance. He didn't look like a human being anymore. Leerin retreated. But his words.....seemed to be hiding something. She must see through it. That was her way of escape.

(To understand Military Artists.....)

She thought of the Military Artist that was the closest to her, Layfon. What would Layfon do? She thought desperately as she distanced herself bit by bit from Roy. She had to protect the Electronic Fairy in her hand. Its death was the equivalent to a city's death. Military Artists were usually the ones who protected it!

(Ah.....) She understood.

".....I see," she stopped moving and laughed. The forced laugh made her face twist. "That's your reason!"

"I said so!"

"You're wrong." Leerin's tension rose. She must change her position and attack. "That isn't a reason to abandon Myath! That's the reason that you fell into such a state?!"

"You!!!" Roy's voice was louder than a normal person's voice. Strong wind assaulted Leerin.

She laughed mockingly. "Pain's revealed your true self? That of a weakling?"

"Wh....."

"You said it yourself. Fear, pain, the hell of Military Arts.....That hell, you mean intense training, don't you? That's simple then. What about the rest? Fear and pain. Of what? If you want others to understand you, you should show your feelings and help them understand you."

"You don't know anything! Don't say it as if you know!"

"As if I know? Why do you think so?" Leerin asked coldly.

Silence. He had nothing to hold onto. Roy now swayed between his dignity and weakness. Leerin had no confidence in how he would react. She was just taking a risk.

(That's my only weapon.)

And.....

"Pain. You must have felt that during training. As strict as my adopted father's dojo, and in the end you couldn't get up! Then what about fear? Something that a Military Artists is afraid of. Fellow Military Artists? That can make you afraid. War? Killing each other is horrible! But those who are asked to take the job are elites like the captain of City Police. Besides, you can't feel that level of fear in a fight between Military Artists. In that case, what's left is.....?" her gaze moved from the sky to Roy.

Roy's entire body trembled.

"Filth monsters!" she scolded. "You ran away from filth monsters!"

"Ah..... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!" Roy hugged his head. "Damn! Damn! Damnnnnnnn!! Those bastards, those bastards! Playing with me. They don't know how horrible it is! They haven't even seen it!"

Leerin's guess was right. It was beyond her imagination how much it had hurt Roy mentally.

He ran away from filth monsters. Probably while on the ground receiving an assault! Fleeing from the horror of seeing filth monsters for the first time! Military Artists were born to protect the city, so they were protected by many laws.....

(Though that doesn't apply to Layfon.....)

Grendan had countless number of Military Artists, so they only received the lowest level of insurance money. That money would increase shockingly if the Military Artist showed he had great strength. Layfon had given that money to the orphanage, so his and Leerin's standards of living remained the same. They grew up together in poverty. Even so, he did not run away. Perhaps Layfon did feel that enormous fear, and he participated in underground matches in order to dispel that fear. He worked hard to keep the orphanage stable.

(Compared to him, this man.....)

Roy was so, so very weak! No, she didn't think being weak was a sin, but a Military Artist who lost to his weakness was even worse than an average person.

"Unforgivable....." Roy said in a low voice. "Unforgivable, woman! You're just a normal person, but you dared to insult me....." he crouched and rushed towards her. He didn't need any weapon. Just a fist would do. The Kei in his fist was enough to finish a normal person.

Something blocked his attack.

"Wh....."

".....How shameful!"

It wasn't Leerin. Different hair colour. Different voice. A sharp gaze pierced him.

"You....."

"Your attitude does sound like one who is banished from the " original city". But being unable to face your weakness, you picked the easy path, didn't you?" Nina let go of his fist.

Leerin stood behind her. She was just buying some time. She knew Nina would come over to check the situation since the nest of light was gone.

"They made something called En and used it to lure Myath..... An En for Schneibel."

Leerin had won her bet.

"You abandoned the city you should be protecting.....You fool. Know your shame!" Nina said.

Roy stepped back with a speed that Leerin hadn't yet seen. He had restored his Dite into a sword.

"Ha, Hahaha! You're joking? Can you defeat me? I know! You traveled here through En. You might have defeated other Wolf Faces, but you can't defeat me!"

"I will, just like how I stopped you before," Nina stretched out the hand she used to stop his attack. "But I won't kill you. That would be the same as waking up from a dream. I don't plan to kill you."

Leerin could only see Nina's back, but Roy, seeing Nina, showed fear in his face.

"I'll deal out the punishment that suits your crime."

"Hu!" Roy was behind Nina. And his figure disappeared as wind in the next second. Nina hadn't moved.

He had fled.

"Is that ok?" Leerin asked.

"No time to play with him. Besides, that's all I could do."

"Is.....Is that true.....?"

A traveler who came through En. Leerin wasn't sure whether she got that right, but she knew Nina shouldn't be here. Nina already said that she felt like she was in a dream. Leerin didn't believe her back then. And now. She didn't quite believe her either.

"I can't explain in detail. This is my first time trying, after all. I'm not sure of the exact details myself," Nina turned around with a troubled smile. "I'm not someone who can be totally fair. I have a sense of righteousness. It might bring misfortune to my city sometimes, but this is different. This isn't what I wanted. I can't force other people to finish it. No matter what my true feelings are, it's some consciousness outside me that determines it. If I say it that way, I might be the same as the Wolf Faces."

"You mean Ignasis and the Rigzario Belief?" Leerin said, remembering the conversation between Nina and the Wolf Faces.

"Perhaps.....As for Rigzario, I don't know whether it's a person's name or something else."

"What's Rigzario?"

"Something from the city I was born in. In the Senou City Schneibel, there's a machine called Rigzario."

The target of the Wolf Faces.

"And?"

"I haven't seen it, but dad said it's the machine that gives birth to Electronic Fairies."

"Huh?"

"The womb that the Electronic Fairy Schneibel uses.....That's probably what Rigzario is. We have other Electronic Fairies besides Schneibel in my city."

"But the increasing number of Electronic Fairies.....?"

"Electronic Fairies travel as time passes to find their own cities..... That's probably it. I myself haven't seen an Electronic Fairy that travels though."

The inert Electronic Fairy in Leerin's hand, small and weak, came to this city to give it life? The Alchemists had made Regios, cities that the level of modern technology could not make.

"Sorry, I didn't know it'd turn out like that. But Electronic Fairies are born in Rigzario. The Wolf Faces have targeted it, and that has something to do with their actions here."

".....So Nina's helping Myath because this has something to do with your city?"

"Perhaps. That benefits me, doesn't it?"

"You can't conclude with that."

Nina took action before she knew about the Wolf Faces' aim. Some consciousness inside Nina had driven her to take action.

"As I thought.....You did it because you're strong," Leerin said, though she thought to herself "Ah, why did I say that?" She continued, "I know someone very strong, but he doesn't run away. I can't say we're his burdens, but he's probably freer without us. I want to be strong, but I'm just weak."

"That's wrong, Leerin," Nina shivered.

"Nina?"

Nina's face was a shade of pale green.

"No matter how strong a person is, he's the same if he has no reason to become strong. Besides, I'm not strong. Leerin, you think I'm strong to fight the Wolf Faces.....my, power....." she crouched.

Leerin went to her and crouched down with her. Sweat beaded Nina's forehead. "I have something to protect, so I, I want to protect it.....And then, I....."

"Wh, What happened?"

"Nothing," she frowned and stood up. Her face was still green. No signs of recovering.

"Hurry, we're running out of time."

She walked away and Leerin ran to keep up with her.

He hadn't considered where to run off to. He just happened to be there while running away.

"Ah ha, Ahha....." Roy panted. He was standing on the roof of a certain building, standing in the shade of a water tank. He gritted his teeth then breathed in deeply.

"You bastard!" he screamed.

Roy was born in a peaceful city. No filth monsters had ever attacked that city. The city kept a certain distance from other cities. Roaming buses only came a few times a year. The city rarely had outside influences. It was a city with peace as its pride. The city that Roy grew up in. Roy's grandfather had fought filth monsters in the past, telling them stories of those fights in the old days. Still, that city did meet filth monsters in the end.

The shocked Military Artists fought desperately. Wearing protective suits, they fought the filth monsters. About a hundred or so of them were dispatched, and tens of them died. Everyone fought in desperation. The elders who had had experience devised the strategies for the youngsters to carry it out. The fight had a miraculous win with just one stain. Tens of people died out of the hundred or so Military Artists, and one person fled.

Roy Entorio.

In a battle they had never fought before, everyone used all their Kei except Roy. The death of Military Artists revealed the city's negligence in its defense despite the victory. Besides, the dead Military Artists all had families. And Roy Entorio fled the battle. The Roy who was an elite among the people of his age..... Those whom Roy mocked as being weaker than him had rushed forward to open a hole in the filth monsters. They had died under the weight of the fallen filth monsters. And seeing that, Roy had fled, an escape that no one would ever forgive.

"Damn....."

And he had then come to Myath, sent to Myath like rubbish by his family.

"Damn....."

Roy had once again run away. Given up the pride of a Military Artist and lured by Ignasis, he had run away from Nina Antalk.

"That woman.....Just you remember! I'll kill you."

But the person he hated wasn't Nina.

"She's just a normal person. How dare she treat me like that!"

He had never told anyone of his secret in Myath.....But Leerin Marfes had seen through him.

"Unforgivable."

"Ah, I see....."

Roy lifted at face at the sudden voice.

"This is what it means to fall. You act what you call righteous, switching good and evil around. So cute. A fall can't be a fall if it isn't this tragic." The voice came from above.

"Who is it!?"

Someone stood bending above the water tank. Roy hadn't noticed him. The person straightened and Roy could now see his face. He was the Military Artist that was with Leerin, named..... Savaris Luckens.

"Is it ok to be here?" Roy asked.

"How could I.....I just happened to have time now! I'm not the type who works diligently, unlike you, wasting time in a boring place."

"Uh....."

"Well, I saw what you did."

"What.....?" Roy confirmed his current location. He was quite far away from where Leerin and the other girl were. "How could you have seen....."

"I saw it and also heard what you said to yourself."

Roy was shocked. Too shocked to feel the insult. He himself couldn't have seen and heard anything at that distance. Luckens had the kind of strong Internal Kei that Roy couldn't even imagine possible.

"I was ordered to protect her. Considering that you might harm her, I have to resolve this problem....."

Roy retreated. He no longer doubted that this person was a Military Artist who was too strong for him. He thought back on how the City Police had confiscated Luckens' Dite, but did that mean anything? He wasn't sure.

"It'd be good if things over there are settled. If possible, I want to settle this quickly too! Since I can't predict the future."

"Uh....." Escape. Roy decided. No time to turn his back on Luckens. He kept retreating, stepping back. He would sustain heavy injuries if he accidentally bumped into any buildings while moving at high speed. He didn't even have the time to put Kei into his feet, and suddenly found Luckens' face before him. A pressure pressed down on Roy's head.

"There's a strategy to retreat, but a Military Artist who likes to run away won't do!" Savaris said as he grabbed hold of Roy's head and shook it.

"Ah Uh....."

Roy found it hard to breathe. Unable to strengthen his body through Kei, he could do nothing but suffer the consequences.

"I don't have the obligation to teach you. I do want to see how you'd react, as someone who can do nothing but abuse the system of the society." Savaris loosened his hold, enough for Roy to breathe. But the next moment he increased the pressure. Roy would never forget the feeling of having the bones of his head almost shattered.

"Anyway, I won't kill you yet. Come with me for a sec!"

Roy had no strength to struggle. It only took Savaris a few jumps to reach his destination.

Military Artists had assembled some distance from the edge of the city. Savaris let go of Roy. Being tossed onto the ground, Roy coughed. Before he finished coughing, he was back on the roof.

"Looks like they're going to greet the filth monsters' attack here! "

Roy went numb.

"I want to know what you'd do as someone who had fled a battle. What would you do next?" Savaris looked at the closest filth monster, widening his eyes. The Military Artists out there should be able to see it clearly at this distance.

"Not much time till its arrival."

"Humph!"

"Oh."

Savaris' foot on Roy's back kept him from moving.

"Allow me to confirm! Can a Military Artist who has fallen once stand back up? You're a Military Artist of this city, aren't you? Would a Military Artist begin life anew or head for the same failure? And after losing, can you stand back up and have a fresh start?"

Savaris wanted to know. "If you don't get prepared, time won't wait for you!"

The Military Artists outside the city called to each other to defend the city. They moved in a fluster. The shooting team began to fill in the Kei cannon. The faces of those in the fighting team turned green. Filth monsters were coming.

The Kei cannon fired. The condensed Kei cannonball hit the filth monster and exploded, shattering a number of scales. The filth monster's cry of pain echoed throughout Myath. Eyes bloodshot with outrage and pain, the monster headed for the city and was greeted with another Kei cannonball. The filth monster didn't halt its advance. With blood spurting from its body, it hammered through the air purification shield and entered the city.

Savaris removed his foot from Roy's back.

"Ahhhhhhhh....." Roy trembled from head to toe. He could do nothing but give voice to his terror.

"No way? Didn't you feel you were once an elite?"

"No, no! Noooooooooooo! I don't want to fight!" he crawled, hoping to move away from here. He wasn't even thinking of using Kei. No, perhaps he didn't even realize that Savaris had moved his foot from his back.

"Aah!"

Savaris was bored of this sight.

"Ah!" Roy screamed. Savaris had shot Roy's body with small balls of Kei and shattered the bones of his head.

"Just lie here and sigh about your current situation," the Heaven's Blade successor jumped off the city to land on the head of a filth monster. "First phase. A mature form? I'm interested in the killing, but her word is the same as the Queen's order," he sighed and put his hand on the filth monster's head.

"Fu----"

He released his Kei. External type Kei – Drip. His Kei seeped slowly through the filth monster's scales and into its cells, beginning to destroy it from its inside. Savaris left. No one would discover what he did here. What Myath's Military Artists saw was the filth monster's movement slowing down. They had to seize this opportunity. All Kei cannons fired their shots. Explosions covered the filth monster. Its body collapsed and bits and pieces fell away as the dust cloud cleared. Someone should have been asking questions, but doubt disappeared in the tide of cheers. Savaris watched this from somewhere else. His gaze moved from the dead filth monster to Roy.

"Is Layfon also as useless?"

The Layfon who fought to protect and betrayed it all. Would he redeem himself or repeat the same failure? This was the only reason why Savaris was looking at Roy.

"I don't want to fight a fellow Heaven's Blade successor, but I just don't want to disappoint myself," he murmured and turned his back on Roy. How was Leerin doing? He must hurry and confirm her situation.

Nina was swaying by the time she reached the entrance to the Mechanical Department.

"Are you.....all right?"

Nina panted, leaning against the wall of the lift. Her face was pale, but her eyes emitted a light that showed she was fighting within herself.

"Why to such a degree....." Leerin paused.

The downward lurch of the lift put Nina's internal organs into a wreck, yet she refused to give up and lose to it. She considered Leerin's words. "Didn't I say it before? The power I possess now is far from what I truly am. Only in a dream can this power be realized, and the result is my losing to what I should have defeated , and my being protected by what I want to protect."

Leerin listened to her talk about her powerlessness, but at the same time, she didn't feel Nina was weak.

"This is a necessary experience to me. The fighting experience. The experience to expose my weaknesses. The experience to become another's strength. I lack all these experiences. Nothing is

more important than the will to stick through to the end, and that's what I need to make up for what I lack."

So that was why Nina was tolerating it?

"But Nina is strong!" Looking at the light in her eyes, Leerin thought the "strong will" that she said was already in her grasp.

"No....."

And Leerin saw the first tremor in Nina's gaze.

The lift stopped and opened its door. Nina staggered out. Leerin went over to steady her. She didn't refuse her help. They could smell the oil in the machines. Tubes covered the place in a complicated pattern. The path curved in between the gaps of the tubes. The dimly lit Mechanical Department gave off a pressuring atmosphere.

"My comrade was injured in the Mechanical Department," Nina watched the scenery in the Mechanical Department of Myath. "At that time, I had a feeling of realizing my goal. That might not be the reason! I, I can't forgive myself. People probably think it's natural to borrow someone else's power when my strength isn't enough, but I can't rely on someone else's strength. I think that way but I can't stop doing that. I can't forgive the me that is like that."

Leerin felt a strong sense of self-reproach from Nina. Not allowing herself to lose. That kind of determination was Nina's most powerful weapon and also her biggest weakness.

For some reason, Nina's words put unease in Leerin.

"How about you relax a bit?"

"What?"

"I understand some of your feelings," she said, remembering her own experience. "In the past, I had thought of growing up. I wanted to become an adult so I could earn some money....."

She had to work to help the orphanage. Though she couldn't earn a large sum of money like Layfon, as long as she could earn some..... "But I knew it wasn't easy to become an adult. My..... friend was like that. The living condition at the orphanage has improved but he was exiled from the city....."

Leerin had a shock too when she heard Layfon had been participating in underground matches. But she wasn't as disappointed as the younger children in the orphanage. She just felt very painful that Layfon was shouldering everything himself.

She smiled at Nina's shocked expression. "What he did has brought happiness to the orphanage. Even if he didn't do that, I thought it'd be better if we did something afterwards. The money he left behind was limited, but we could make preparations. I need to learn more so I can do more for the orphanage."

What she was doing now was for the sake of Layfon's past efforts. Hence, she had chosen to study. "Your comrades know what you try hard to do. It's ok even if you fail. It's all right to fail many times now so you won't fail in the most important moment."

"Don't say that so easily!"

"Then failure can't be forgiven?"

"What?"

"I'll forgive. Uh.....On the other hand, I know he thinks he can't be forgiven."

On the day when his deed was exposed, he kept mumbling " sorry" as the children from the orphanage looked at him with icy gazes. He had done all he could. His shoulders slumped. So lonely and tired.....Watching him, Leerin wanted to cry. She felt regret and resentment for not having noticed what Layfon had been doing.

"Reproaching yourself is the same as reproaching others. That's what I think, so rather than reproaching yourself, why not just strive forward?"

"I see....."

"Nina should have a lot of people that you worry about? You must lift your spirits for their sake!"

"That.....Yeah!" Nina smiled and nodded. "I don't know the situation, but I can't go back yet. For the sake of this....." She must save Myath.

"I feel like you're the hero of a story," Leerin smiled. A story of releasing the world from pollutants.

The tense atmosphere had eased.

"Resolving different people's problems in a different place. I feel that what Nina is doing now is like what a hero would do!"

"My personality isn't that good."

"Personality has nothing to do with whether something can be done."

"Perhaps.....But I'm still immature!"

Leerin smiled, admitting Nina was stubborn. The two of them finally arrived at the center of the Mechanical Department.

"This is....."

Wrapped in thick planks, it looked like a small hill.

"It's similar to the one in my city. Leerin, has Myath recovered?"

She checked the bird.

"Still weak."

The bird still couldn't stand. It could only move its beak. Was it because the supply of Selenium had been cut off? Anyway, they must put it back quickly.....

"Yes," Leerin nodded and headed for the hill. Nina grabbed hold of her sleeve.

"Uh?"

"......Come out!" Nina restored her Dite to stand before Leerin.

"......What a shock!" Someone appeared from the shadow, and Leerin's eyes widened.

"Thanks to you, my clones have returned to the Aurora Field."

The man wore the mask of a beast. He felt different from the Wolf Faces. He felt alive. His meaning was clear. His eyes contained within them an intense goal like Nina's. A dazzling light shone in the depth of the mask.

"I see. I can't defeat you people if I don't strike the real body?"

"That's the dream of Ignasis."

"So you're staying somewhere safe while your clones fight? Ignasis really is a coward."

"Military Artists are not allowed to be cowards? That's unfair, the weakness of this world."

"What did you say......?"

"Military Artists are people given the fate of war.....Have you ever asked why? What's the difference between the strong stringed by fate and the weak? It is as if your fate is already planned by others. And you've never doubted?"

"Don't tempt me with words!"

"Negotiation collapses. No need to tempt you anymore," he restored his Dite. "But you'll soon regret your ignorance."

His blade was like a saw. It wasn't made to cut, but to dig. Leerin felt an evil air from that person.

"Nina....."

"It's ok!" The greenish color remained on Nina's face.

"The Haikizoku works for its own purpose. The collapse of the power balance must be painful!"

"You....."

"Isn't it natural to use what you have?"

The man moved. Leerin failed to catch his movement. All she saw was Nina being struck back, flying to crash into a tube.

"Nina!"

"Stay back," Nina shouted.

Leerin retreated. She still had Myath with her, so the man would probably chase after her. Nina's figure disappeared as the noise of fighting sounded from every direction.

(But if this continues.....)

Myath was still weak. It might die if Leerin didn't take it back into the place, but she couldn't move with the fight going on. She didn't know how Nina did it, but Nina continued to fight.

"What should I do....."

Myath was losing its body heat. Leerin controlled herself. She must find a chance to close the distance.....

"No....." she breathed in deeply. She must not let the man win. With Leerin's physical condition, it was impossible for her to run this distance. The life in her hand was trickling away. She looked for a sign of life in Myath's gem-like eyes.

The small eyes reflected something that she couldn't comprehend.

"This.....What is this?" But Leerin saw it. She saw it. As if she was looking through a looking glass – Nina. But the sound of fighting continued in the Mechanical Department. Nina shouldn't be reflected in Myath's eyes.

"This.....What is this?"

Something else covered Nina. A golden goat and a young girl with long hair.

"What's going on?"

(Haikizoku.....An Electronic Fairy.) The voice sounded in Leerin's ears. She looked around but didn't see anyone.

(The power of hatred for filth monsters wars with the power to protect. This balance has been broken when the filth monsters drew near.)

Haikizoku.....The man with the mask of a beast had said so too.

"Hatred against filth monsters? So the Haikizoku in Nina wants to destroy her body because it knows filth monsters are close?"

But Nina chose to fight the Wolf Faces instead. Was that the reason that the balance was lost?

(Yes.....)

Leerin didn't say anything but something had answered her.

"Are you speaking, Myath?"

Myath was the only choice.

(Yes.)

A weak voice that did not belong to a male or a female. A neutral voice.

(Two Electronic Fairies are inside Nina. One is the Haikizoku. The other is a normal Electronic Fairy. The Electronic Fairy is controlling the power of the Haikizoku. And that is the balance that enables Nina to control it. But the Haikizoku's power increased when it sensed the nearness of filth monsters.)

"What should I do?"

(You must calm the Haikizoku.)

"How?"

(.....)

"This is connected to your life. Keep at it!"

Called by that strong voice, Myath answered weakly. (Pray!)

"Huh?"

(You hold the En of Grendan..... No, you hold the En of the other Electronic Fairy that Grendan has hidden. You're rare. Your prayer can calm the Haikizoku.)

"Then, what.....?"

Grendan had hidden an Electronic Fairy. Leerin didn't know.

(Pray. Pray to the hidden Electronic Fairy. The prototype of all Electronic Fairies.)

"Pray..... How?"

No answer. She could only hear the sound of fighting and Nina's pain. Any information on religion was the legacy of a time long past. It was said that prayer could increase one's faith. Anything else was just an individual's wish. Hoping the day would sail by smoothly and peacefully was only a person's wish. It

was useless if other people didn't think so. Saying anything in everyday words was meaningless if she didn't make a wish to a god or any other supernatural entities. Even so, Myath had told her to "pray!"

"Um!" Leerin prayed. Nothing surfaced in her mind except for her wish for Nina to win and the Haikizoku to calm down.

(But who do I pray to?)

Myath mentioned the hidden Electronic Fairy, but what was it? Leerin hadn't the memory of such a thing. In Grendan.....? She recalled the beast she saw on the night when Gahard attacked her and Derek. That was probably Grendan's Electronic Fairy.

"If that was Grendan, then there really is an Electronic Fairy I'm unaware of....."

Because it had hidden itself, it wouldn't easily show itself before people.

(Now that I remember it, Synola senpai was there too?)

She chased the flitting memories of the past, recalling how she had fainted and woken up with Derek beside her. Was Synola senpai with her when she fainted?

(AH?!)

It seemed Synola and Savaris knew each other. Leerin didn't think it'd be so easy for a Heaven's Blade successor to so easily tell her of his mission. Then why was Synola there?

(.....Ah.)

Reflexive thinking took her down the memory lane of her time with Synola as their first meeting surfaced in her mind.....

(Why, why did I cry at that time?)

Leerin had lost her way after the entrance ceremony, and met with Synola who was lying on the grass. As she watched Synola, tears spilled down her cheeks. It wasn't sadness, but a feeling threatened to burst out of her chest.

(What was that.....?)

What was it? She must recall it. That feeling.....

- Let me lend you a little of my strength then!

"Ah?"

- But please don't forget.

"Who are you?"

- Because that moment won't come again.

"Why?"

- Because, it's near.....

Leerin's consciousness went empty the next moment.

Nina kneeled at the intensity of the Wolf Face's attack.

"Uh....."

"For someone who can't control her Kei vein, you've worked hard in this fight!"

"This is nothing!"

"This will of yours to fight against the Haikizoku is worthy of praise."

More voices from the Wolf Faces.

"But will alone can't take you any higher. We'll cut you down here!"

"As if!" Nina stood up and readied her iron whips. The weight she was used to in her hands turned painful. In the next moment, the iron whips lightened tremendously. It appeared the power inside Nina was unstable. The iron whips turned heavy again..... Proof of the instability of her Internal Kei system. It was hard to move with this much pain in her.

The Haikizoku was inside her, and Zuellni was losing its control in suppressing the Haikizoku. The strength of a Haikizoku came from its hatred against filth monsters. If Nina's will was any weaker, she'd have ended up as Dinn.

The Wolf Face man remained inert. He wasn't that far from the center of the Mechanical Department but he chose to be cautious, leaving no opening for her to take him down.

"I can't lose here!"

She must return to Zuellni where Layfon and everyone were. Zuellni. A place where she had things she had to do and wanted to do.

"No matter when it is, fighters who fight with a purpose wouldn't want to lose," the Wolf Face man said lightly and blocked Nina's assault. His saw-like blade slashed at her left leg. She kept her distance from him.

This was like fighting against a wall. And her condition was far from her best. (Damn!) She forced herself to stand up as she pressed down the despair in her. The pain in her left leg restricted her movement. She stretched her hand. She knew it wasn't easy to win against the Haikizoku. And that fight with it was preventing her from fighting against this Wolf Face man with her full potential. Despair.

Strength that hardly matched a dream. The shadow of despair that had caught hold of her since the formation of the 17th platoon. She needed a strong sense of determination and resolution to dispel that despair and fear.

"This is all I have."

How could she stop this reality? Nina stood up. To lose her heart and fall – That wasn't permitted!

Who wouldn't permit it? Nina herself.

"Aaaaaaah!" she howled and stood up again.

The Wolf Face hadn't moved from his position of victory. In silence, he swung down with his sword.

And-

"Uh?"

"What?"

They both felt it and they both turned their gazes away from each other to look at Leerin. Leerin was praying, but her eyes watched somewhere empty, blank. Something had appeared at the line of Leerin's sight.....

What was that?

What was that?

"What.....?"

That attraction exuding from Leerin wasn't that of Kei. That presence was hidden from others.

"What.....You, can you be....."

Something had deeply shaken the Wolf Face. "I knew it.....This isn't a joke. Ignasis knows you. So that's why? For a normal person , a non-Military Artist, to appear here. That's why!?" Wolf Face said to the invisible presence.

"....." The presence remained silent. The air trembled.

"So bad. This is bad!" Someone said, appearing behind Leerin.

Nina recalled this was the Military Artist who was with Leerin in the canteen.

"It's not everyday that I get to head outside the city, but I can't do what I want. Besides, I just came from a fairly boring fight."

Why did he appear? This man was looking at Nina and the Wolf Face man without a hint of surprise. Obviously, he wasn't surprised at Leerin's condition either. Was he observing them all along?

"My mission is to protect her. I thought I could let you go if you don't mean to hurt her, but that person said I can't. In truth, I don't care about the fate of this city."

He was looking at what couldn't be seen. Had he seen it? It appeared he had some level of understanding of it.

"A Heaven's Blade successor?"

"Excuse me. I'm Savaris Qaulafin Luckens," Savaris smiled at the Wolf Face man as he introduced himself.

(A Heaven's Blade?)

He was the same as Layfon? Why was he here?

"To expose yourself here. It's indeed an incomprehensible situation, but I did anticipate it," Savaris continued. "You're under Ignasis. The first Luckens fought you too. The first of my family was a hero, so we had wanted a tale of some legend, but for some reason, my family is unexpectedly plain. That, I really hate!" A smile still hung on Savaris's face. "Geez.....I want to say I'm glad to be here. If I hadn't heard of the story of the first Luckens, I wouldn't have taken that person's order so seriously. The residence of monsters. I wouldn't have taken it so seriously.....!"

Savaris vanished.

"Uh-"

Savaris had his hand around the Wolf Face's neck as he lifted him off the floor. The Wolf Face flailed his sword at his attacker, but Savaris blocked it with his bare hand. The blade shattered into pieces, leaving the handle intact. Layfon had also used this skill before, but Savaris did it with his bare hand. The Kei from this Heaven's Blade successor battered Nina. If the Wolf Face was likened to a solid wall, then Savaris was a typhoon.

"Tell Ignasis," he declared with laughter. "He can't win with this boring style of fighting."

Nina averted her gaze the next moment as the sound of shattered bones assaulted her eardrums.

"This is the strength of those who are truly powerful."

The sound of something heavy hit the floor. But when Nina turned her gaze back to the fight, the body of the Wolf Face man was gone.

"Ah~ they can't die. That rumor really is true. That's troublesome!" Savaris said, looking at the floor. He then turned his gaze to Nina. "......You. I saw you when you suddenly appeared. I see. A fight that we can't get involved with but is nevertheless connected to us really does exist. The First of Luckens didn't lie."

"You.....Are you really a Heaven's Blade successor?"

"Yes!" he nodded.

"I knew about you! That's.....Rigzario. You got information from there?"

"Wrong." A man like a storm who could blow everything into the air in a sudden. An icy gaze accompanied his smile. "Did you hear this from other Heaven's Blades? .....If it's Layfon, then that's another matter."

She must hide the truth. If this man knew it was Layfon, she'd be in danger.

"It seems my guess is right!" he said, discerning the slight changes in Nina's expression.

"Humph-!"

"Don't you feel that the stirring in your Kei is now back?"

"Aa-? Ah....." Now she did realize her body felt normal.

"This means the Haikizoku inside you has been suppressed. This person is the origin of all Electronic Fairies. All Electronic Fairies listen to her, and that includes the Electronic Fairy that has gone mad."

He strode to her, his sharp gaze pinning her to the floor. "You knew Layfon, so you must be a student at Zuellni! Then please convey to him a message from me. I'm heading to Zuellni to take over the job of the Mercenary Gang. My purpose is to bring back the Haikizoku – no matter the means."

"What did you say.....?"

"To the thing inside you," he stood next to her, took hold of her head with his hand and lifted her up. Eyes that seemed to be laughing. The presence of unrestrained violence swallowed her.

"I'll kill you if you fell so far like a worm. I'll eat you whole if anything's left. You no longer need.....that power!" he released her. Nina felt the strength inside her being sucked away. Embarrassed by her defeat, she heard Savaris say "Not interested anymore."

That unusual presence was gone, leaving behind Leerin who was staring at an empty space as if time had stopped.

"Please convey my words to Layfon," Savaris said and left.

".....Eh?"

What did she do?

"Ah? That....." She couldn't recall anything except for the feeling that something big had happened.....

"Speaking of which.....Uh? When did I get here?" She had no idea why she was spacing out in the Mechanical Department.

"Uh?" She saw her hands put together but nothing was in it. A feeling. A feeling of warmth was all that was left. Something wet fell on her hands.

".....What?" Her face was wet too.

"Why, why am.....I crying?" Yes, it was a feeling of having met with something very important. Something she couldn't lose. Very important.....

The sound of trembling shook Leerin's entire body. Everything else around her vibrated.

"Ah....."

Green light exuded from the tubes in the Mechanical Department as the vibration hit the air. It felt like blood was circulating around Leerin. Orange light flooded the bottom of the Mechanical Department.

"It's working!"

The City's multi-legs woke into movement. The city was leaving the danger presented by filth monsters. Myath's crisis was solved.

"This is great!" She wanted to share this happiness with.... With whom? She couldn't remember.

Nina had hidden herself to watch Leerin. "Memory loss.....the same as Layfon?"

But this felt different to Layfon's situation back then. Leerin's mission was the same as Nina's. "But I saw the depth of that mask. Am I wrong.....?"

Leerin wasn't a Military Artist. Her fate was too cruel. "The Alchemists who made Regios.....Did the world become like this because of them?"

The world before the coming of Regios that nobody knew about . Perhaps Nina was now in contact with something from the past. " But why does Leerin have the same mission?"

Leerin was just a normal citizen traveling outside her city. However, she possessed something and that something was guarding her. Savaris too. Why was a Heaven's Blade guarding Leerin? Did she have some secret?

"So many things remain unresolved!" Nina shook her head.

No time to think about that though. "Time to head back?" She felt dizzy as her consciousness left Myath.

"Am I returning to Zuellni.....or?"

Was she being taken to another city to continue her fight with the Wolf Faces? Dixerio, the person who sent her on this path, was he fighting somewhere too?

"There're things I must do."

She must return. Everyone would worry about her if she continued to remain missing. Besides, she was still concerned with how much the Haikizoku had affected Zuellni's Mechanical Department. If the effects remained in place, then Zuellni was still in danger.....

"And Layfon. He must still be reproaching himself!"

She needed the reassurance. "Head back....."

The strong will that came with thoughts.....

"Can Leerin really be.....?"

Nina's figure disappeared from Myath as she finally realized her suspicion.

Chapter 6: The owner of the blade

"Time for you to go," Karian calmly said, despite feeling a little terrified.

"I don't have the confidence to win."

The filth monster was leading them.....In this unbelievable situation, Layfon was sitting on a bike with Karian and talking with him.

It was an ancient filth monster. So ancient that even Layfon couldn't tell which phase it was in. Its swift appearance had brought fear to the entire city. Karian had then called for the special team to stop its attack. Did he trust the words of that filth monster? Or was it because he was in despair?

The filth monster didn't make a move against the Military Artists and Zuellni. All it did was hover above the city. The Leader of the crowd.....It was waiting for the Student President Karian to finish his preparations. Karian had then ordered Layfon to go with him.

"This is my first time seeing such an ancient filth monster. It is my first time knowing they can speak the human language. I don't think I can win."

"We don't know whether we need to fight yet."

Layfon couldn't see Karian's face, hidden by his helmet. Karian's words, transmitted by the flakes, did nothing to ease him.

"If we have to fight, doesn't that mean we'd be annihilated in one moment?"

"Perhaps....."

Felli was still recovering and had not received permission to leave the city. The Psychokinesist of the 1st platoon was acting as their support.

"I'm not interested in how powerful this filth monster is, but rather in what it proposes."

"I don't think we can deal with it....."

"That isn't an issue," Karian said, putting his hands together. "So long as it understands human language, then there's room for negotiation. We have to quickly understand what it values, then decide how to negotiate."

So Karian really was here for the negotiation. Layfon pressed on the accelerator to keep up with the flying filth monster. He didn't think the negotiation would work. Their bike sped along the uneven ground. It leapt over an edge of a raised piece of earth to land heavily.

"I've had this doubt for a long time," Karian said loudly. "Filth monsters. They eat pollutants. Do they really have to consume human meat to survive?"

"Uh?"

"I've investigated the living conditions of the filth monsters. The most beneficial information for a City is the way to fight filth monsters. And what is the best is to be able to avoid a fight. Fighting filth monsters guarantees a certain level of harm. No matter what city it is, one or two Military Artists would die in a fight. That's the same with Grendan. Even with Zuellni now. Sending out a Heaven's Blade successor again and again to fight them is still detrimental to our fighting strength."

Layfon himself was the best proof here.

"But filth monsters will attack us."

"Yes, but why?" Karian said.

"The way the larvae consume each other isn't anything special. It's the baptism needed for the fittest to survive, and it's also a hunt . Eating each other isn't evil in their eyes."

"But they never thought of it this way."

"Yes, that's the problem. A human baby isn't immediately aware of his consciousness. Humans live together to find food. But what about filth monsters? They prefer to obtain nutrients rather than consuming pollutants. In that case, what about the matured filth monsters that can think for themselves? How so? Isn't that in itself a complex way of communicating?"

Layfon's cold reply had an opposite effect and made Karian more excited.

"When we solve that problem, we can perhaps find new ways to deal with filth monsters."

"By talks? But would they not eat us rather than listen to us? They're hungry." Layfon's experience at the orphanage placed him firmly on Karian's opposite side.

"We might have to kill the larvae, but it's different with a matured form that possesses knowledge and the capability to negotiate."

"So what do we do?"

"We've to understand why they attack cities! Is it really just for human meat? Human meat and any other animal meat is the same in terms of being nutritious. We just need to make food that caters for them. Besides, we can replenish the loss of food in the city by selenium."

Layfon shook his head. Allow filth monsters to come into the city to buy food? Filth monsters to buy food with money..... Ridiculous. Impossible.

"Reality isn't like that though!"

"But it's worth trying. And....."

The filth monster slowed as the ground evened out. Karian put his hands together again.

"That filth monster didn't attack the city without reasons. It requested the head of the pack to attend the negotiation, and that really bothers me!"

"....."

Then Layfon realized that it wasn't the speed of the bike that had changed. It was the filth monster. They were getting close to their destination.

"I wonder whether anyone has ever gone to a gathering of filth monsters?"

Shocked by Karian's curiosity, Layfon sensed the atmosphere around them. No killing intent from hungry filth monsters.

But next came the change of scenery. Layfon quickly gripped the handle and made an emergency stop to the bike's movement.

"What?"

He heard Karian's muffled voice. The sound came from outside the helmet. The Psychokinesist's support had been cut off. His vision had turned narrow.

"Please reply!"

No matter how many times Layfon called, the Psychokinesist did not reply.

"What's going on?"

"Psychokinesis is blocked off here. Please be careful."

Layfon took out his Dite but Karian stopped him. "Wait, we're here to negotiate. Don't do anything to provoke the other party."

"But....."

"Let's see how it reacts," Karian slid off the bike.

Endless plain surrounded them. The dry earth looked like it had been cut apart by a blade. However, the color of the air was much more transparent. The color of the sky where the filth monster was , remained the usual rusty red, but the scenery here was what one could see only in a city. The air that was clear as water. This place was obviously different from others.

"Is this space a 3D image? What's going on?"

"This kind of technology....."

Layfon looked around to confirm Karian's words. The gear he wore for outside city use prevented him from having contact with the air, so looking around did nothing to help him discern whether this reality was true or not.

"Uhah.....? Layfon, what is it?" Karian pointed.

Layfon strengthened his vision with internal Kei. He took the bike further up and saw a rocky mountain that sat like teeth, blocking his way.

"Eh? .....Impossible!" his eyes widened in shock.

He returned to Karian's side.

"What is it?"

"Come and see!"

Karian took his seat and Layfon pressed on the accelerator with his foot, pressing all the way so he couldn't press on it anymore.

"What did you see?" Karian asked.

The time it took them to arrive at the place seemed so much longer than Layfon remembered.

"This is....." Karian understood. He slipped off the bike to stand as of someone sleepwalking.

The sound of rushing water shook their helmets.

"A lake.....or a waterfall?"

In the middle of the mountain range that resembled teeth sat a large lake. A waterfall fell on the opposite side of Layfon's location . The rumbling of water and a screen of hazy water shrouded the lake.

"This doesn't look like a 3D image!" Karian wiped the surface of the helmet.

A few droplets of water had also splashed onto Layfon's helmet.

Green grasses and small flowers adorned the side of the lake. Pollutants had conquered the arid world. All animals and plants besides filth monsters were dead.....That had always been Layfon's belief. But this place that the filth monster had shown them.....

"This? This isn't affected by pollutants?" Karian said calmly.

"How, how is that possible....."

"We won't know till we bring this back for investigation. Besides, the filth monster here is already different from the ones we know!" Karian dug up a small plant and put it in the bag hanging around his waist.

"So you've shown us what needs to be seen. Isn't it time to show yourself?"

"Uh, you've noticed?" The filth monster was already above the lake. Had it hidden itself? Or had it used teleportation just like the time when it appeared in Zuellni? Karian couldn't tell.

The filth monster spoke as if it was already holding a conversation with him. "You do hold the air of a leader!"

"Thanks. But I still don't know your true purpose," Karian replied without shock.

Layfon held tight to his Dite, observing the filth monster solemnly as he suppressed his urge to snatch out his Dite and restore it.

The huge body of the filth monster was on top of the lake, but the surface of the water remained calm without a ripple.

(Illusion.....?)

But the pressure of the body felt real. That long neck, that gigantic body, those huge, curved wings. They all felt so real.

"Uh....."

"Speaking of which, what is your name?" Karian asked, unafraid of those massive eyes of the filth monster's.

"Though I hadn't used it for long, people have called me Cloud-cell Separation Interface IV Harpe."

"Can I call you Harpe?"

"As you like," Harpe nodded with its long neck.

"Then, Harpe. I'm guessing that this is the real meaning behind your negotiation. One, you want to prove that humans and filth monsters can communicate. Two, humans are a threat to the survival of filth monsters in what we call this world, but there is a bigger mission. Three, you don't wish to fight humans. That's all," Karian said it all in one breath. He lifted his head to look at Harpe, and waited as of a student waiting for a response.

"Hohoho, we'll leave the first two points. Do you think I don't want to fight humans?"

"Yes, if you wished to fight, Zuellni would have been destroyed. You didn't do that, so I think you don't wish to fight. All the same, you don't want Regios to enter this territory."

Harpe called through its nose. Its eyes studied Karian. "Got a good brain there. Well, to want to hear the words of another creature's heart isn't something that can just be done. How about we just say the truth and hear the truth?"

"It's my wish for a beneficial negotiation," Karian nodded in satisfaction.

"Then allow me to start the question. What made your city enter this territory? A normal city wouldn't have come here."

Karian answered that question honestly, telling Harpe about the contact with the ruined city, the invasion of the Haikizoku, the City's Electronic Fairy on a rampage.

"Haikizoku..... The insane Electronic Fairy? I see.....Does it hate us?" Harpe said with his long neck bent in apology. Its short foreleg scratched its lower jaw. "The invaded system caused the city to go on a rampage?"

"Yes. This isn't our will, nor is it Zuellni's will. I hope you understand this point."

"All right, I forgive you for entering the territory."

"Thank you."

Harpe and Karian actually held a conversation. That fact didn't keep Layfon from abandoning the belief of this as something unbelievable.

"But this only holds in the present. The city has not stopped moving, and if the Haikizoku forces it to invade the territory further, we'll do all we can to eliminate it."

"I understand," Karian said.

"Then onto the next topic. I heard what you said while you were riding that thing."

"Well....."

"I'm Cloud-cell Separation Interface IV. I know everything that happens in my area."

"That's amazing."

"Um, well, the business trade you talked about, I'm afraid, the implementation is impossible. It's not impossible to happen in the area that I control, but I can't do anything about filth monsters outside my area. Besides, no city can enter this territory."

"What a shame."

"You want to resolve this quickly, I see. For humans who are limited in their movements and are weak at survival, it must be extremely difficult for you to fight your enemies."

"I'm afraid so, so we're looking for solutions. Harpe, do you know the way to fight against the Haikizoku?"

"No. I'm Cloud-cell Separation Interface IV Harpe. My purpose is to guard the boundary between the edge of the world and the Aurora Field. I do not have any information that lies outside the management of the Human Preservation Plan."

Aurora Field. Human Preservation Plan. Terms that Karian had never heard of.

(And why is this the only filth monster.....)

".....I see. I understand," Karian nodded.

Layfon felt uneasy.

"Then let's find a way to solve the problem of the city. Harpe, please allow the city to stay here for a while."

Harpe had lifted its long neck. ".....There's no need," it said. Its gaze turned to the sky and it spread its wings.

"Your city is moving away from my area. You better hurry and catch up to it."

Layfon was surprised at those words as he supported Karian under the beating of the wind.

"The city is moving.....?"

And it was moving away.....So the city had started evading filth monsters? Meaning.....?

"Hurry, the city moves as fast as the bike. It'd be troublesome if we end up having to chase after it," Karian said.

Harpe was gone. The presence of the filth monster that had a name had disappeared, as if it was just an illusion.

"I know."

They mounted the bike.

(Captain.....Is she safe?)

That wasn't his naive dream. He must confirm the reality. The tires of the bike bit the dry ground and the bike began its mad dash. The scenery changed after a time of riding.

"Oh, Oh!" Karian's voice drowned out the engine's call. A group of matured filth monsters stood in a file as they watched Layfon and Karian leave.

"Such grandeur!"

Layfon felt like he was a doll under those gazes, but Karian's attitude remained unchanged. The same as when he held the negotiation with Harpe, except his voice was now different.

".....Let's hurry!"

Layfon accelerated to the maximum. There were more than ten filth monsters watching them, and all of them looked like Harpe. Filth monsters that were born from the same mother shouldn't all look the same in their matured forms.

(I feel.....Something feels really bad.)

The bike continued to run madly.

"Not working. Still can't contact Zuellni! Are we heading the right way!?"

"The direction is correct."

But they would miss Zuellni if they erred in the direction. Harpe had said the city was moving, so it must also know Zuellni's direction. Layfon and Karian had left the sight of the filth monsters .

Layfon saw something ahead of them and stopped the bike.

"What's wrong?"

"These are the city's footsteps!"

A human made pit in the shape of a square. Not dugout, but pressed with a huge weight that could cut through the dry earth. Layfon looked far ahead and saw similar footsteps.

"We won't get lost if we follow them."

The problem now was whether they could safely catch up with Zuellni.

"If we can contact them, the city can come back for us."

"Anyway, let's catch up!" Layfon started the engine and the bike ran for a whole day.

Night. Layfon could keep on going but considering Karian's strength, he had found someplace to rest instead.

"Anything wrong?" Karian said. He had climbed off the bike for a rest.

"Nothing....." Layfon felt as if something was lurking behind them.

(Filth monsters? Or is Harpe watching?)

They might be monitoring them to make sure that they left. And that feeling didn't sit well with him.

(Well, it is a machine.)

He meant Harpe. That filth monster moved like a robot.

(So humans in the past made filth monsters?)

He couldn't think of any other explanation. Pollutants filled this world, and only filth monsters could live in it. But reality was that the machines that humans made had taken on unusual changes – that must be it?

(I wonder what the Student President thinks?)

He wanted to ask but Karian probably wouldn't say anything here. They were still in Harpe's territory, and anything they said was apparent to it. That hateful presence was still here.

(Can't fight it.)

Karian was already asleep.

(The Aurora Field, the edge of the world.....)

Layfon returned to the bike and fell into a shallow sleep.

(Is that place really the edge of the world?)

They had lost the map of the world. Was there really an edge? An edge like the Regios edges? If there was such a place, why the monitoring.....? The light sleep stopped Layfon from thinking further, besides, returning to Zuellni was their main problem now. About the reason behind Zuellni's movement – he needed to find out whether it matched his speculations.....

He and Karian moved from their camping spot before dawn. It was during the day when contact through Psychokinesis recovered .

"Finally found you."

"Felli?"

Layfon and Karian exchanged a glance at the sudden voice inside their helmets.

"Did you get the doctor's permission?"

"Saying this means you two are ok! I got permission this morning and went to search for you. A bit of a confusion at the start because I couldn't use Psychokinesis in the area."

"That's good. Please give us the directions."

"Right."

"......If possible, please find a route that the Student President can drive on," Layfon cut in.

"What do you mean?"

"Here they come!" he pulled out his Dite while the bike was still rolling across the plain. He inserted a card into one of the slots on the Dite.

"You can drive?"

"Ah, yes, but....."

"I sense a number of presences behind us, 0402 and 0840."

"What?" Karian looked back.

Layfon stopped the bike. "Filth monsters!"

"How come?"

Filth monsters were flying towards them.

"Are they not the same as Harpe?"

"They've been hiding in this area."

The presence of murderous intent born out of starvation. The presence that Layfon was familiar with.

"So Harpe's control isn't absolute," Karian sighed. Layfon stepped down to the passenger seat of the bike.

"Please don't mind me when you drive."

"All right," Karian pressed on the pedal and the bike started running again. Layfon connected the handles of the Adamantium Dite and the Sapphire Dite and restored them.

"Layfon, the flow of Psychokinesis is obstructed in my investigation of the filth monsters," Felli said.

"What's happening?"

"I don't know, but is there a reason why the filth monsters can't let you go?"

"We're still in the area.....It's not strange the use of Psychokinesis is affected. We can't deny the possibility that Harpe might have changed its mind. These filth monsters might be as powerful as Harpe. Anyway, it has its own purpose," Karian speculated.

"How far can you use Psychokinesis?" Layfon asked.

"Not for long distance. It'd work better if I can come to your side but that isn't possible.....If you go inside the group of filth monsters, your transmitter and visual aid would fail. I might even end up losing your position."

"Pretty bad?" Karian said.

"If it is just fighting, I don't find the situation too bad."

A number of matured forms. They wouldn't be cut open with the steel threads as easily as did the larvae. Karian immediately understood the implication in Layfon's words.

"I'll be troubled if you don't come back. Is there a way to make some of them head another way?"

"I don't think so. Perhaps this is their first time coming across food other than pollutants. They've been enduring for a while. Now they can't wait anymore."

What should they do? It was useless to ask. Layfon was the only fighting force in this situation. None of the filth monsters were in their aged phase, but they were matured, males that were

probably in phases 1-3. Lintence was the only Heaven's Blade who had the skill to slaughter a large number of filth monsters at the same time. But Layfon hadn't managed to learn all of Lintence's skills.

"If you're correct, then they're just heading over for a change of taste. Felli, please find a route that the Student President can drive on at full speed. If possible, find one that isn't too far from Zuellni. "

"Got it."

The Dite changed into its steel thread form in place of the sword form held in the Sapphire Dite. The Adamantium Dite did well to support jumping on steel threads over a large area.

"Did a lot of thinking?"

"Just thinking on what I can do."

"I don't mean that. I mean you," Karian said. "Academy City is like a passage. All who associate with it will leave after they graduate. Is this place really worth protecting? It isn't because the Military Artists are yet to mature that explains their weak fighting strength. It's because they all hold the same doubts. What can they protect? Is what they're protecting important enough to them that they should die for it? Military Artists lose courage and flee because they fail to solve that problem."

The bike made a huge leap. Karian's body shook violently when the bike landed, and Layfon steadied him to prevent him from falling off. His helmet smashed against Karian's.

"Why are you fighting for Zuellni? Not for money. If you were that type of person, I'd be very willing to put you beside me, but you're not like that. Your purpose is to survive, and you rely on Nina Antalk to survive. Because both you and she won't change much in the next few years," Karian said as Layfon continued to pour Kei into the steel threads. The distance between the trap and the filth monsters was shortening.

"There are people who exist to help point out the path of life. Before the end of their lives, people are solving their own problems in different situations. But you're not one to fight at the cost of your life. Will you fight for Zuellni even if it costs you your life?"

"That kind of thing....."

The filth monsters had entered the steel thread area. Layfon leaped onto the threads and howled, "How should I know!"

A few filth monsters had been cut by the steel threads and fell onto the earth. Layfon concentrated on a filth monster before him instead of checking to see whether the others were dead.

Karian went to meet Harpe for the sake of Zuellni. He was just a normal person, yet he did it to protect Zuellni. Then was Layfon the same? The Layfon who had been pulled through by the intense will of Nina?

"How should I know!"

He pulled the steel threads, controlling them as he ran on them. Blood spurted from filth monsters' bodies. The distance between Layfon and the bike became wider. Zuellni might be the reason why the filth monsters had chosen this path. The destination that both Layfon and Karian were heading for. In that case, Layfon must take care of them here. The problem now wasn't with the number of steel threads he had but with the length of them.

"What is it?" Felli said.

"I don't think it's a problem handling them here, but it'll be difficult to fight filth monsters that are further away," Layfon said.

"Um..... we've a tiny problem here," Karian said.

"What?"

"Felli, how much longer till we reach Zuellni?"

"Two hours minimum. What's wrong?"

"The batteries. Two hours. Amazing!"

"Ah....."

Two hours. They had spent two hours resting at night and cutting off the engine.

"We already used the spare battery."

A bike wasn't the same as a roaming bus. Still, the bike was made for long distance travel, so the batteries shouldn't run out so easily, and they did change a new battery before they slept!

"No way! Perhaps it sustained some damage during the ride. A place that can damage the battery....."

"How come?"

"We won't make it unless Zuellni comes to meet us..... What should we do?"

It wasn't possible to kill all of the filth monsters in two hours.

"You're calm, Nii-san."

"Getting into a panic does nothing. So what does Layfon plan to do next? If you plan to stand there and fight with your life, I'll stay with you."

"Nii-san!"

"The filth monsters might not split up even if I run away as bait. So we can only rely on Layfon and buy some time for Zuellni to finish its preparations!"

"You don't have to do that," Layfon said. He didn't really like Karian, but not many people could show his calmness and resoluteness while conversing with a filth monster. "Zuellni cannot lose its Student President."

"Thanks, but....."

"Leave this nonsense and come back!" someone else said angrily .

"Ah! Vance, you heard us!"

"Of course! We've relayed the current situation to all Military Artists. We're making preparation. You just need to head straight back. We'll take care of them."

"That's reckless....." Layfon said.

"You shut up. I'm the Head of Military Arts! I won't allow you, a platoon member, to disobey an order. Just keep those filth monsters together while you head straight back for Zuellni. This is an order!"

The anger in the voice allowed no protest and kept Layfon silent.

"Do you really have a plan?"

"I'll show you the defense we have. Just come back!"

"That makes me glad," Karian said.

"That's right. I'll lead the way," Felli said.

"I'm counting on you, Layfon. You can return while keeping them like this, can't you?"

"Got it."

He wasn't satisfied but it was true that he couldn't fight them all alone. Layfon returned to the bike.

"Counting on you!"

Karian put his attention back to driving as Layfon did his best to herd the filth monsters together. The filth monsters chasing them were tangled in the steel threads and those who tried to split up were herded back by Layfon's external Kei.

"Isn't this unbelievable? He....."

"What do you mean?" Layfon said, keeping his eyes on the filth monsters.

"He made a decision to fight so many filth monsters!"

"Well....."

"You said you couldn't win against Harpe. To you, the meaning of a fight depends on the gap of strength between you and victory. I don't mean you aren't prepared to die in a fight, but that's about what your fight is like – chosen from the few to enter the arena. What did you fight for? It must have been money in Grendan."

"....."

"You fought under disadvantageous circumstances. You haven't fought differently so you don't understand their feelings."

"Student President, understand what?"

"To understand that they have what you don't have!"

The reason to protect Zuellni. The reason to fight even at the cost of one's life.

"What?"

"Glory!"

"Eh?"

"You might think what kind of reason is that. But most Military Artists fight for the pride and glory inside them. Only they can protect the city. They protect their cities with their hands.....And that's the meaning of survival!"

Layfon recalled Karian's speech at Zuellni.

"So you did it for that?"

"Yes, in order to summon their pride. They chose the pride of a Military Artist, and that is a reason worthy of throwing one's life away for."

"So stupid, how....."

"But what else is left? A Military Artist has the duty to fight filth monsters once he's born to this world. That's why the society made changes for them. In order to obtain glory. Duty doesn't mean simple sacrifice. Military Artists fight with their pride to protect the city. That's what society trains them to do."

"....."

What're you saying? That's a lie! You're wrong! But Layfon didn't give voice to those thoughts. He understood deep down that Karian was right.

Karian glanced at him a bit sadly. "You weren't trained like that. Perhaps you had that question before you received your training..... Either way, your pride is as a Military Artist who doesn't die. And for that, you can keep on walking no matter how hard life becomes. As a Military Artist, you don't escape from reality. And because of that, you have to find your reason to fight. I wanted to say this to you too, Felli."

Was this Karian's love for his sister?

Felli didn't reply. The bike continued on its path. The murderous intent of the filth monsters shrouded Layfon and Karian, as if that tension was about to explode. The steel threads cut through the murderous intent. The liquid spurting from filth monsters' bodies turned into a mist. Those monsters who fell onto the ground writhed in agony, and were immediately consumed by their brethren.

The two hour long flight was about to come to an end. Karian's bad driving skill allowed the bike to slide on the ground, and that wore out the tires quicker than usual. The brake wasn't as sensitive now. The engine was overheating and parts of it were melting. The bike wasn't the only thing edging close to its limit. Karian had almost exhausted his physical strength and concentration as he experienced the terror of filth monsters outside the city. He did all he could to keep himself calm and dispel the fear in him like all other Military Artists.

"The signal's out. Seems we're about to run out," Karian mumbled.

A red light was flashing in the middle of the control panel, and the status of the battery showed "low".

And Zuellni finally appeared before them.

"Great....." Karian's words were cut off. The bike swayed as his head lulled.

"He's lost consciousness!" Felli said in a shrill voice. The sight of Zuellni had broken Karian's concentration, causing him to sink into a slumber. The bike crashed into a huge rock and Karian was thrown out of his seat.

Layfon caught the Student President in the air. The engine sparked and the entire bike exploded. Pieces of the bike scattered

and cracked wheels shot upward. Layfon ran ahead of the explosion. The weight of Karian prevented him from dashing at full speed.

"Five more minutes. Keep at it! Run!" Vance shouted.

Layfon bit his lower lip, the steel threads waving madly behind him.

Jump, run, leap.....He ran through a sea littered with debris to where Zuellni stood. Something sounded on the surface of his helmet. The pieces of earth shattered by Zuellni's passage danced everywhere, and those pieces of small debris hammered Layfon. Praying the debris wouldn't damage the protective suit, he kept running. Unable to evade the shattered pieces, Layfon headed underneath the city.

A presence behind them suddenly surged. His steel threads closed in on the filth monster and cut apart its wing. It lost its balance to slide on the ground.

"Wu-!"

But the filth monster didn't give up. It slid with the momentum of its fall with its jaws wide open, planning to sweep Layfon and Karian into its mouth. Layfon could've jumped up to avoid the attack, but he couldn't do it with Karian on his shoulder.

"Keep running!" Sharnid's voice sounded from Layfon's helmet. Gun shot. And the filth monster wailed. The bullet had shot through its eye.

"Compared to attacking the enemy head on, sniping really is much more enjoyable!"

Layfon kept running. The door of the city was close, and he could see Sharnid standing there. Two new figures slipped through the door and leapt past Layfon, one holding a lance and one holding a baton.

"Aaaaaaaaaaah!!" Naruki roared. She adjusted her landing trajectory in the air and swung her baton with all her might at the weakest scale of the filth monster – in between its eyebrows. The attack bounced Naruki off the filth monster's body, but her attack managed to shatter the scale and expose the meat beneath. She tossed out a rope and it hooked itself onto the filth monster's lower jaw.

"Aaaah!!"

She slid down the rope, the rope stopping the filth monster's movement, pulling its head down to the ground.

"Heee....." Naruki pulled at the rope to keep the filth monster in place. Her shoes sank deep into the ground and the rope made a moaning voice at the pressure. The tug of war didn't last long. Naruki let go of the rope and left her spot.

Dalshena leapt up. Her lance stabbed deep into the wound that Naruki had made. The bone of the filth monster's head broke as Dalshena's external Kei destroyed the brain cells. Blood spurted from the filth monster. Its head crashed heavily onto the ground. It died.

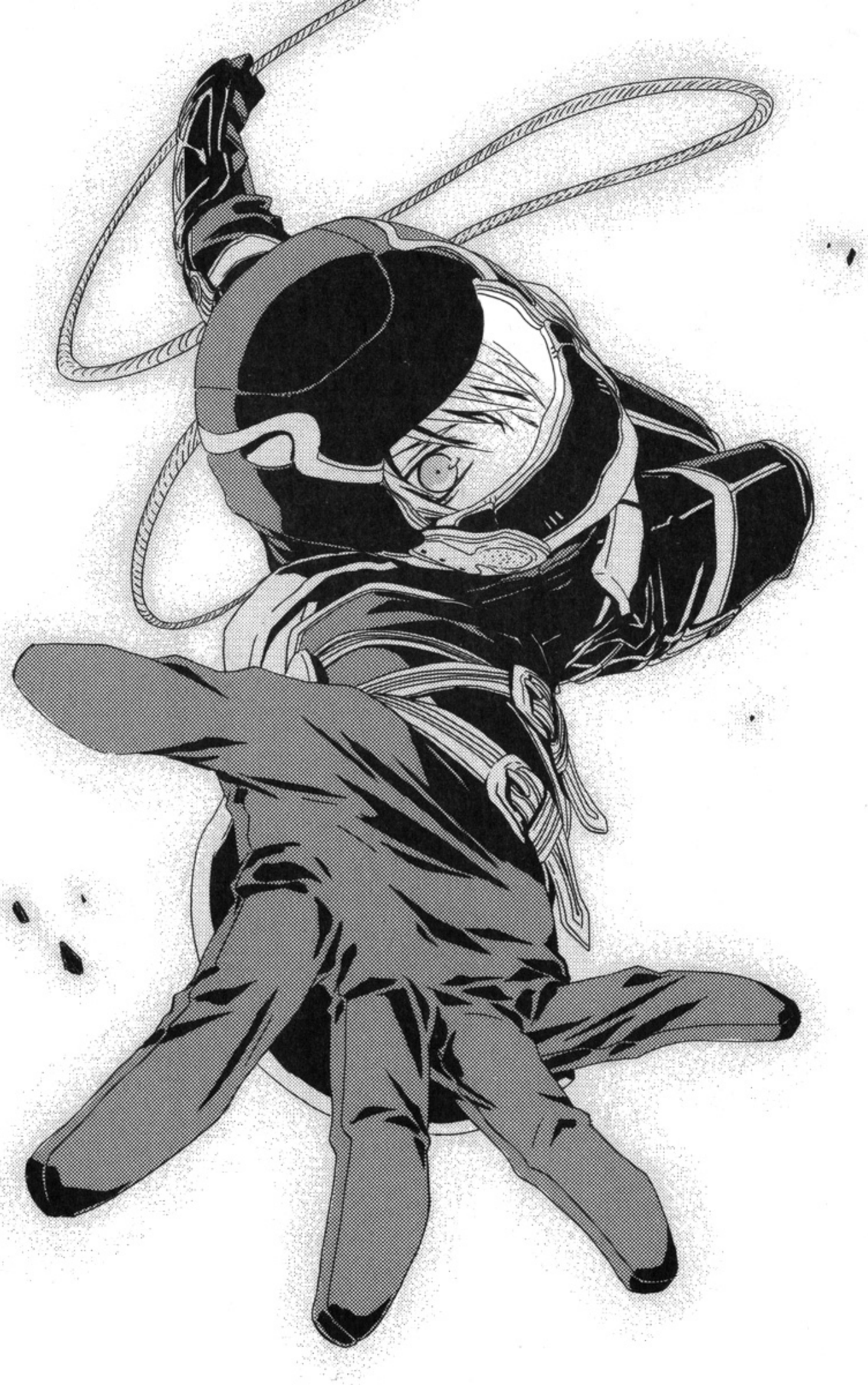
Shocked at what had happened beside him, Layfon hadn't stopped running.

He then felt a change above him.

(What is it?)

A massive amount of Kei was being gathered on the outskirt of the city.

Layfon arrived below the door. No time to use the lift. Should he jump.....? A new figure appeared at the door. Wearing a protective suit, the figure slid down the rope, its length coiling around her waist.



"Give me your hand!" her voice sounded in Layfon's helmet.

-- The voice he had wanted to hear for so long. -- The voice filled with colors. -- The voice that shone before him.

Layfon leapt and took hold of her hand. He handed Karian over . They confirmed each other at the closest distance possible.

"You're back!"

"Yes!"

They spoke without using the force of Psychokinesis.

A great flash of light enveloped them the next second. A huge ball of Kei had shot out from the city, obliterating a large number of filth monsters and triggering chain explosions.

"Let's go!"

"Yes!" Layfon retrieved the steel threads and turned the Adamantium Dite into a sword.

The feeling of the tightening of relaxed nerves. The feeling of his flesh and his concentration coming together. The feeling of Kei exploding from head to toe. He was confirming what he had – some kind of meaning that could release his strength. Something that was like a parasite.....This was the current Layfon Alseif, howling alone as he leaped into the battlefield.

Pulled back into the city, Nina put Karian down. The medical team , its members all wearing protective suits, rushed over to tend to the Student President. Nina looked at the battle. The second shot of massive Kei closed in on the filth monsters like a ball of light.

"This is....."

A weapon she had never seen before. The intensity of the Kei made the air vibrate.

"The Kei cannon!" Karian said, standing up with the support of the medical team. "It's not on that huge a scale. We need about 100 Military Artists to recharge it. Not a very good weapon."

"To make this weapon, that means....."

"We don't have to cower under the threat anymore, besides....."

Nina watched Karian's eyes.

"He has become his original self."

"No! If he does that, then it's meaningless for him to come here. You're the Student President. You shouldn't be tolerating his condition. Don't you realize that you're using him like a tool?" Nina reproved.

Academy City. A city that no one could view it as home – that was the city's fate. A cold yet gentle place that nurtured newborn birds that had yet to fly.

Karian was shocked by Nina's words. "I'm using Layfon as a tool.....?" Outrage surged in him. It wasn't like that! – He wanted to shout it out, but ended up swallowing it. He calmed himself down. "I'd receive punishment if I did that."

But Leerin had said.

"He has to shoulder the agony that is the result of his punishment. When that time comes....."

Reproving himself and reproving everything around him.

Nina watched the battle. Layfon was dancing with the filth monsters, sword held high.

"When that time comes, and till the end....."

She wanted to stand with him.

"He shouldn't feel regret at what he himself has done."

Nina continued to gaze at the battlefield. She felt a sigh coming from Karian.

Birds called somewhere out in this world.

Epilogue

The roaming bus still wasn't there.

"What's going on?" Leerin said at the bus station. She was fed up. The bus was many days late, according to the schedule. Only the sound of the lonely wind and the vibration of the city's multi-legs accompanied the outer edge of Myath.

"Well, not all things go as smoothly as expected!" Savaris said, sitting on the long bench with his back bent forward.

Leerin came to the bus station everyday, and Savaris always accompanied her. A number of passengers also came to check the status but after confirming the bus wasn't here, they all left. Only Leerin searched for the roaming bus with the pair of binoculars she had bought.

"Even if you do that, the roaming bus won't appear."

Savaris's pair of binoculars were more powerful and he could see further than her. Leerin didn't listen to him. She ignored him and looked through her binoculars again.

"If....." Savaris said. "What if Layfon become a coward?"

She lowered her binoculars to look at him.

"If he hasn't started anew and lives his life dragging himself around. What would you do?"

A person surfaced in Leerin's mind. She met him in the assault on Myath, the Military Artist named Roy. A Military Artist who had encountered failure and was exiled. A Military Artist who was twisted and had failed to regain his courage. Whenever she recalled Roy, somewhere deep inside her she would ponder whether Layfon was the same.

"Well....." Savaris smiled, as usual. Leerin knew he wasn't really smiling.

She chose her words carefully. "It's ok if he's not acknowledged, as long as he's done everything he can, but....."

What if Layfon was like Roy?

"I'll knock him awake," she said and balled her hand into a fist. Compared to Savaris' stronger arms, her small and delicate arm held up her fist.

He looked at her with a vague expression. "Really?"

"Really."

He smiled and shrugged in admiration. Leerin saw his real smile. She once again picked up her binoculars.

"Since you're looking for something, why not look at something that can be seen!"

Some other noise came through to them.

"Eh?"

"Such as that," he pointed.

Leerin adjusted the direction and the strength of her binoculars. A huge figure was moving above rolling dust. She thought for a split second that it was a filth monster.

"A city?"

"Yes."

"No way, why is a city here....."

"This is the time!"

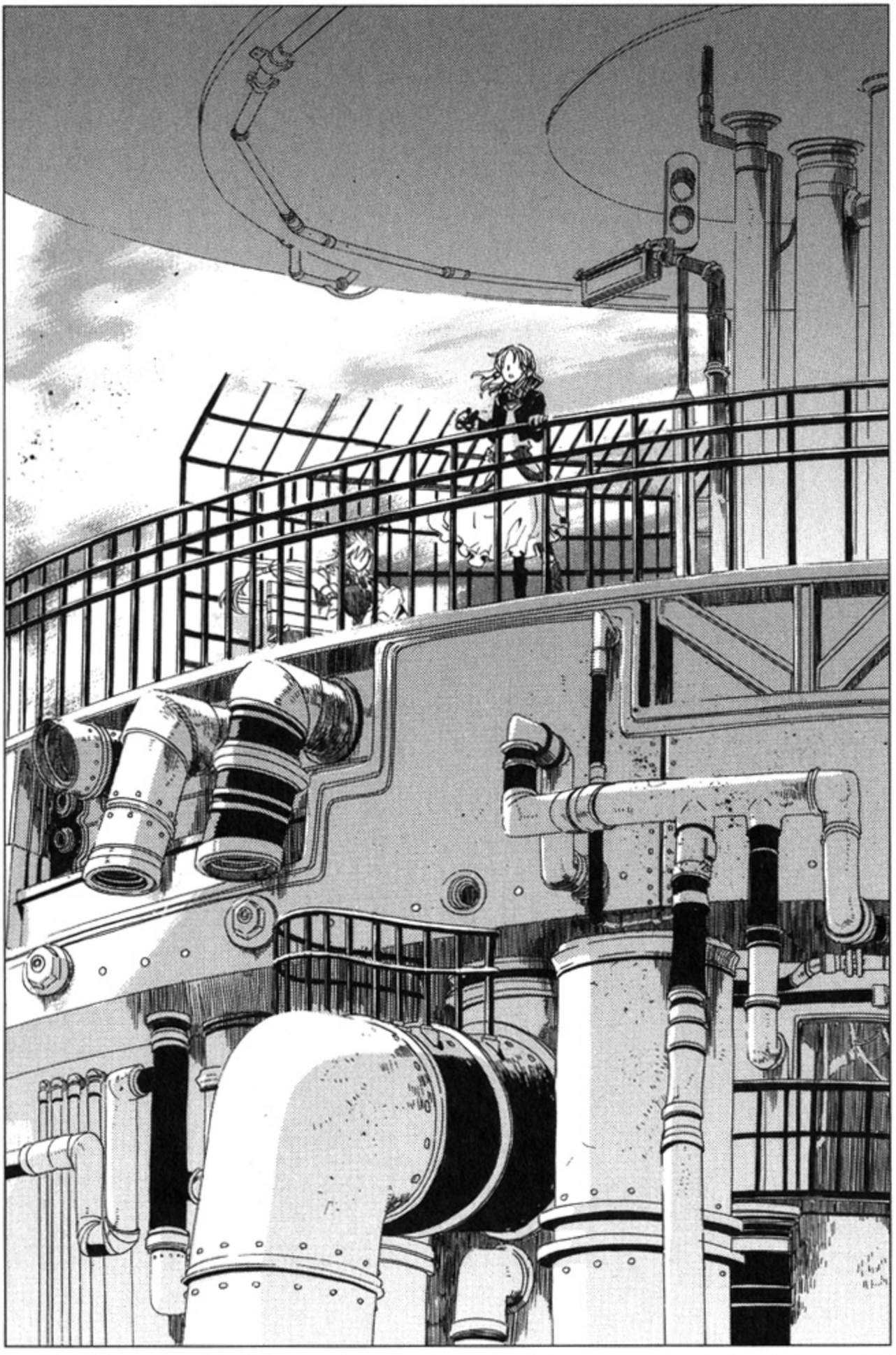
A fight for selenium.

"We're entering a fight?"

"Strict rules are set in a fight between Academy Cities, so it won't be that intense. Besides, you see the flag, don't you?" he urged.

Leerin didn't see it at first as she was adjusting the strength of the binoculars, but she managed to catch her target. The image of a young girl was weaved onto the flag like a crest.

".....Eh?"



She had seen that crest in Layfon's letter that told him he had passed the entrance exam.

"Can this be....."

"Looks like we don't need to wait for a bus!" Savaris said.

Leerin watched Zuellni, the city that was heading for them.